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JANUARY

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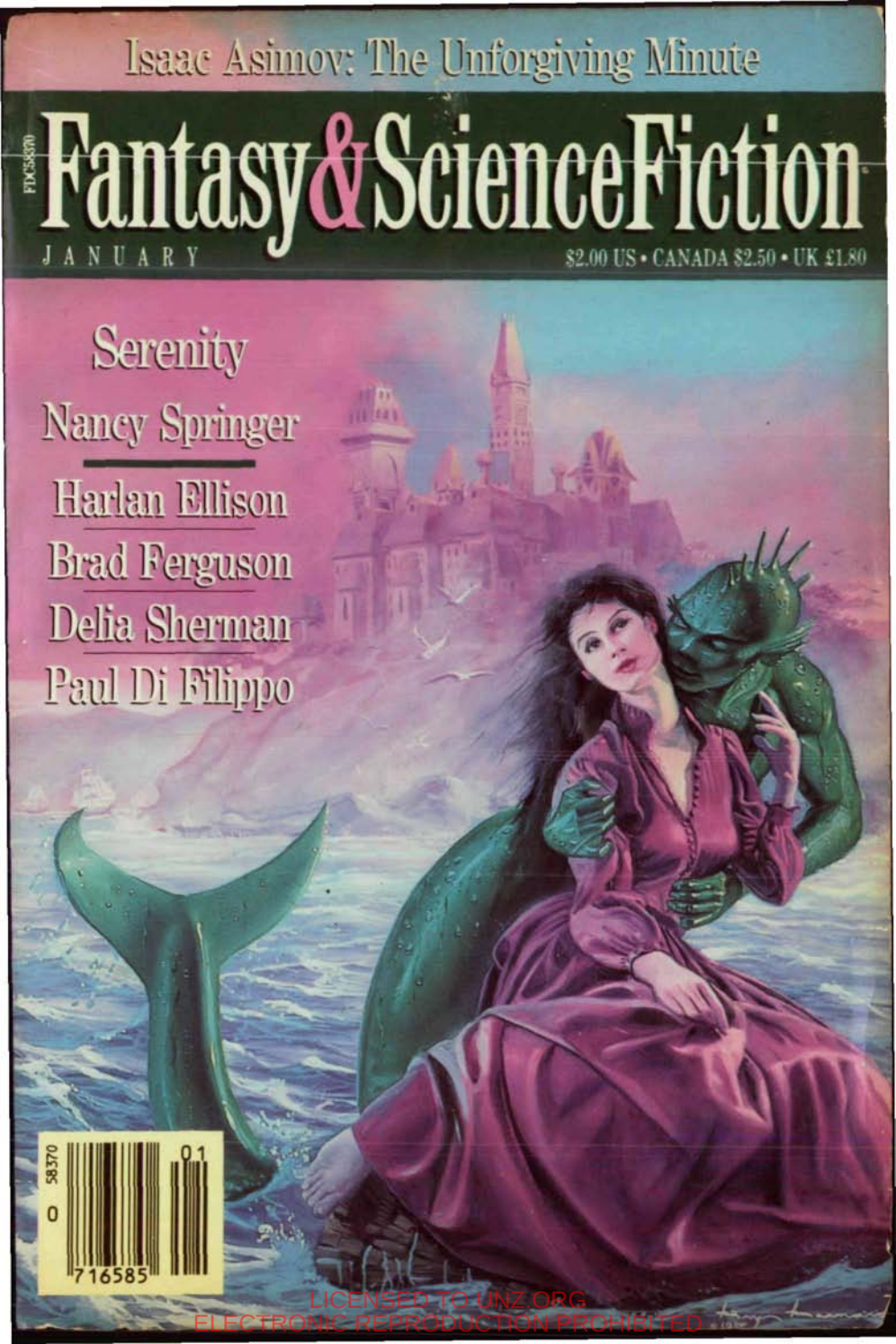

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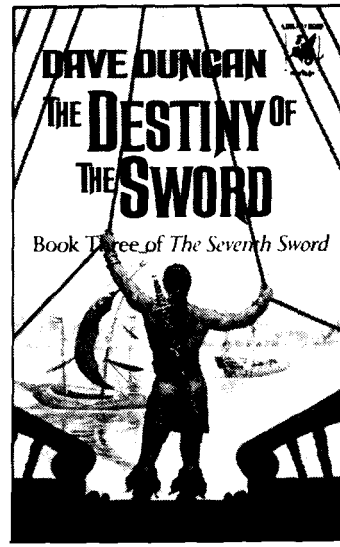

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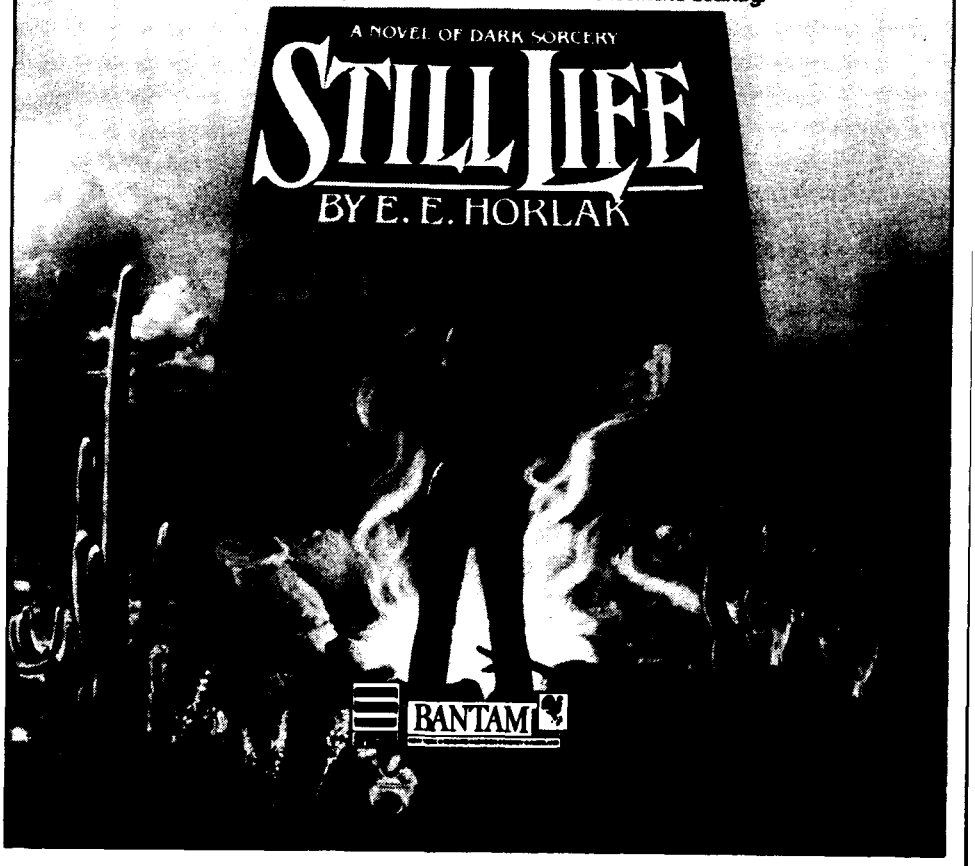

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THE MAGAZINE OF
Fantasy & Science Fiction

Including VENTURE SCIENCE FICTION

JANUARY • 40th Year of Publication

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CARTOONS: JOHN JONIK (30), JOSEPH FARRIS (50)

COVER BY BRYN BARNARD FOR "MISS CARSTAIRS AND THE MERMAN"

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Nancy Springer is primarily a well regarded novelist, but she will also be remembered for her award winning story "The Boy Who Plaited Manes," (October 1986). Her new story is a powerful tale of the relationship between a wild girl and a gentle man, in a world where gentle people die soon . . .

SERENITY

By Nancy Springer

HEY! YOU HORSESHIT, get out of there! Hey, that retard is at the food again!"

The man threw a fist-sized stone at her. It missed.

"Bitch!" More people ran to the attack.

The girl took no notice. She knew that these were not true Survivalists. Escapists, they called themselves. Dirty and hostile, but with no weapons to speak of, they would not last much longer, even isolated amid the Wyoming rangeland as they were. Not many people with compunction lived to be old in the 1990s, not after the collapse had emptied the cities.

"Maggot! Get out!"

She continued tearing at the raw potato with her mouth, like a coyote, her face and grubby hands smeared with flour — she had already eaten her fill of that. It had taken the Escapists awhile to notice her. It was mid-afternoon, and they were trying to get high, and the cooking shack was separate from the cardboard sleeping shack, for fear of fire.

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"You filthy mother—"

They swore and threw stones at her from close range. The missiles stung her and rattled into the tin-pail cooking pot. One cut her bare chest. She ignored them and ate on. The Scapists did not dare to lay hands on her; they knew she bit, and a human bite becomes infected worse than any other kind; a man had died from her bite. They did not want to kill her, for she was human, and they retained some scruples. But they fervidly wished to drive her away for good. One of the women brought a club—

She ran at her first glimpse of it, dashed away up the stony slope, dodging between the sagebrush clumps with surprising speed. Her wild mane of hair flew out behind her, full of knots. Long, it reached just to her coccyx, and her naked buttocks flashed below it, dun. She ran half bent over, hugging the gnawed potato to her chest with one hand, and every few strides as she ran, she effortlessly touched the other hand to the ground, so that from a distance she appeared to gallop. Then she disappeared over the rimrock, gone to join the mustangs up on the butte.

"Little whore," one of the women muttered, offended in spite of herself by the girl's nubile nakedness. And one of the men turned away to hide a certain crude stirring.

She sat on an outcrop amid one of the small herds and basked in the year's last sunlight. Looking out at yellow aspen and yellow tufts of rabbitbrush, she imagined the trees mating. They had to do it; everything else did. Maybe not — the aspens grew so straight, they had to be virgins. But those thick, twisted pines that looked half dead — they came alive in the night, she felt sure, the muscular one arched over the other; that stumpy, jutting limb at the odd angle; and there, that pulpy hole surrounded by puffy lips of bark. . . . She had felt an odd sensation as she ran, her small breasts bouncing — that was new. She looked down at them, noted two swelling curves beneath grime and flour, ran her hands over them. The touch tingled. Prickling, she thought of rubbing them against coarse hair, and she shot a glance at the stallion, afraid.

Redchest was his name in her thought. He was old and much scarred. The girl was scarred herself, a Pollock canvas of unnumbered marks from unnumbered kicks and nips, for she had to find her place in the order like any other equid. . . . All the horses raised their heads and peered at her as if smelling sex in her thought. The dominant mare, Gray, swung her head.

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forward in mild threat, and the stallion snorted and stirred restlessly, watching over his small harem. Stallions hardly ever slept.

The girl got up hastily and trotted off, telling herself she would go to the river to bathe.

She had not understood it at first, the mating. Not with no one to teach her. Lost from her human mother somehow in the turmoil of the late eighties, when terrorist gangs and the nuclear threat had sent so many fleeing to isolated places in the West. Three years old then, with only the milk of a bereaved mare to sustain her. Standing under the shelter of that brown belly, she had seen the sexual act as enormous, random, a cosmic violence: the squealing of the mare, the stallion's teeth sunk in the crest of the neck, the immense black tool driven in — and the foaling, just as frightening, the mare groaning and trailing blood and membrane as if she had been torn inside out. . . . Sometime later, finding the hidden orifice in her own body, all the more fearsome for being unsuspected and unseen, she realized that something of the same sort could happen to her.

The river was low, trickling between red mud flats, since the autumn rain had not yet begun. This was dry, high, windy, short-grass country, fit only for mustangs. It had been a reserve, some sort of government park, though all such distinctions were meaningless by that time, as meaningless as constitutional rights. The young male mustangs, the bachelors, were drinking at the river, biting and jostling for precedence, kicking each other and rearing into stylized mock combat. Seeing them, the girl veered off toward the rimrock to avoid them.

She knew she was not a mustang, of course. She had a name of sorts. It was Ren or Sren or Rendy — she felt vaguely that there was more, but she could not remember. Some words she remembered, enough so that she sometimes talked to herself in a babyish way, though she did not truly understand the curses that the Scapists flung after her, only their angry tone. Living with the horses, she felt on edge, in constant danger. She was not a member of any herd, not even the filly herd, and none of the horses knew what to do with her since she had failed to mature and bear foals in four years. . . . Mare mother was long since dead, winter-killed. The stallions sometimes charged her, sometimes tried to gather her in. Redchest, Big Black, White Eye, Scarface. . . . She was afraid of the stallions.

There was a dark slot in the rimrock, the entrance to a long, dark passageway between outcroppings. Rocks did it, too, it seemed, the ran-

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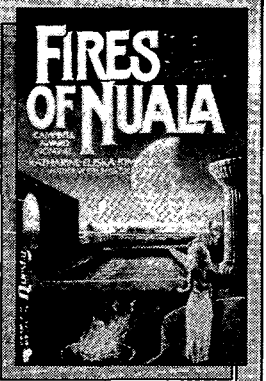
The radiation emitted from the planet Nuala's trinium mines is mutating its



race in unexpected, often deadly ways. In the ruling Atare family, it has been decreed that ruler and direct heirs alike must marry offworlders to ensure the purity and continuation of the line. But someone has ruthlessly slain both the Atare elder and almost all his heirs.

Now the new Atare leader and a beautiful thief from the stars join forces to discover whether the traitor was one of their own, or if it was offworlder agents out to seize control of Nuala's government and mines. One thing is for certain—they must unmask Nuala's enemies before it's too late.

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A WORD FROM Brian Thomsen

Many books that are written as part of a series sometimes rely too heavily on their place in an overall collection. So you really can't understand Pigeons of Fluff *until after you've read* Fluff's Revenge, *and even though the just-published* Prelude to Fluff *precedes* Clutterhouse Fluff *in chronological order, it is actually more enjoyable to read after you've finished the later volume. Sort of confusing? Sure it is.*

The bottom line is that a good book should be able to stand on its own. That's why Kathy Kimbriel's FIRES OF NUALA (even though it's a prequel to Fire Sanctuary*) is an exceptional work of sf on its own and can be read before or after* Fire Sanctuary. *I say before or after because I know once you've sampled Ms. Kimbriel's work you'll obviously want to read more. Likewise for Octavia Butler's Patternist novel WILD SEED, which can be read on its own or as part of her earlier series. Fans of her more recent* Xenogenesis *series should please take note.*

When you see me around, be sure to ask me what wonderful books I'll be reading and giving as gifts over the holiday.

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dom, violent, terrorist act. Ren paused for a moment, repelled. But this was a warm place when the wind blew, a sheltered place, her home, as much as anyplace was her home. She wintered here. With a toss of her mane, she went inside to sleep. The stallions would not follow her in here.

She thought of the mine shaft as bottomless, probing the very penetralia of the earth, though in fact, she did not know how deep it went after it disappeared into a pool of brackish seepage. She had never ventured even to the edge of the pool. Once well into the inner dark, she curled up against a timber upright and soundly slept, her belly filled with raw potato.

Dream. Butterflies in coitus on the wing. The crazy old black woman on the far mountaintop, up among the eversnow.... The Escapists, flattening beer cans into roof shingles. Sweep of scrubland. Mustangs at the gallop: Redchest herding; Gray in the lead with her ears laid back; Spot, Blacklegs, Bigrump, Bonymare, and Starfacefoal all flickering past, broomtails skimming the dusty ground; and Redchest the stallion turning and coming at her, head down for herding—

A small sound, as of a hoof on pebbles, woke her, and she sat up straight with a hissing intake of breath. There was a man groping his way down the mine shaft with a flaring pine knot in hand. At her movement he stopped where he was, head poised and swaying as if he were a snaking stallion closing in on a mare. The stance both thrilled and terrified Ren. She did not know that he was merely trying to focus his faulty eyes.

"I beg your pardon," he exclaimed, staring. "I don't mean to intrude. Is this your home?"

Ren waited, crouching, prepared to bite.

"I'm just looking for someplace to spend the winter, you know," the man said. "I understand that if you burrow deep enough, it always stays above fifty degrees. So I just thought — well, I know it seems asinine, what with the Feds after me and so on, but I did want to stay alive until springtime."

Ren felt short of breath, looking at him. He had dark, curly hair and a long profile. His eyes were dark, too, and he had a way of holding his mouth that was at once humorous and full of noble pathos. In fact, he was by far the most attractive man Ren had ever seen, if only because he was young and clean-shaven and not as shabby as the Scapists.

"The name is Aaron Prince," he added. "I didn't really want to be put

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in the army and killed with the first boomboom, though that old crackpot over on Neversummer is probably right, and good old Yahweh will do us all in soon enough. . . . Say, would you answer me? Are you all right?"

Ren had not understood much of this, but her snarl had faded. She was entranced by the level tone of his voice, the words addressed to her in manner as if communication might yet take place, agreement be reached. The situation enthralled her with its irregularity. She wondered how long the man would go on talking.

"I can't see you very well, you know," he apologized. "My glasses got lost months ago, and, you know, getting them replaced is just hopeless. I used to be an artist — can you believe that? Lived all my life with my poor old mother. Now here I stand half blind in the middle of nowhere — are you there?" He wobbled his head again. "I'll feel damn silly if I'm standing here talking to a tree root or something. But I thought sure I saw something move. . . ."

He came a step closer. Ren was no longer very frightened of him. She sprang, not to bite, but merely to knock the torch out of his hand. In the comfort of the resulting darkness, she shoved past him and ran up the broken tracks toward the entrance.

"Oh, I see!" the man exclaimed, not at all perturbed. "You're the horse girl. Say, there's no need to run off. Stay if you like! There's room enough for both of us."

Ren stopped for a moment, trying to comprehend this cordial invitation.

"I won't hurt you," Aaron Prince said.

If not, he would be the first. Gentle people died soon, and Ren was too young to have met any.

She headed away from him, this time at a walk.

In addition to rounding up draft evaders for what promised to be the final war, the Feds would sometimes round up mustangs. The animals were valuable both as food and as transportation since the supermarket-style technology had collapsed. For the rounding up of manpower, the Feds used regulation troops and vehicles powered by valuable petroleum fuels; but for the rounding up of the animals, they used horses and mercenaries, broncbusters for hire. Native talent.

A trio of these fair-weather Feds came to the beer-can-and-cardboard

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settlement of Scapesville-by-the-River, and it quickly emptied on their account, for where the one sort of Fed roamed, the other sort might not be far behind. Sometime cowhands these, straw chewers, they made their camp, tethered their own horses firmly, and built their bronc trap out of greasewood. It was a flimsy thing. Pole aspens grew down by the river, but the horses were up on the butte, and the men had a deadline to meet, not weeks to spend hauling rails. Horses can generally be counted on for their stupidity when it comes to barriers. Starting at dawn the next day, the broncbusters rounded up their quarry and ran the wild horses into the pen, expertly.

They rounded up Ren along with the mustangs. She was not fast enough to truly run with the herd, so she had learned to ride in order to keep up, grasping a mane and bellying herself onto a bony back, hanging on with hands and legs. Mares being herded along by their stallion had no time to buck, and, after a few such wild rides, she had lost her fear. The faster the gallop, the better the ride on Blacklegs, Gray, Cathips—

The mustangs milled frantically in the pen, showing the whites of their eyes, the stallions sparring and lathered, trying to separate their mingled harems. Ren slid down from her mount and stood among them, feeling worried but secure amid all the big, strong-smelling bodies. She had always felt secure among the horses so long as they were not concerning themselves with her.

"It's a girl!" one of the Feds yelped. "By God, I told you it was!"

"No prick on it," another grudgingly agreed.

"More like a monkey than a girl," the third one grunted.

"Let's get a closer look at it."

A lariat twirled. Ren was not ropewise. She saw the thing snake through the air toward her, and in the next instant her arms were mysteriously pinned to her sides. Horses screamed and reared as she was pulled over to the fence and out a makeshift gate.

She snarled ferociously and spat in warning as the men surrounded her. But these strangers were not frightened. They had not heard of her venomous bite. "Full of it, ain't she?" one drawled as they laid her on the ground.

These three knew their business. They liked to capture things, tame them, break them. One man placed a heavy gloved hand over her mouth, calmly, meditatively. Another got hold of her kicking feet and spread

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them. The third, apparently the leader who took precedence in matters of this sort, admired his target.

"That's a girl, all right," he breathed. "Cherry red. . . ." He removed his gloves and spread the labia with his fingers, then raised his hand to his nose and sniffed appreciatively. He stood up and unbuckled his belt to let loose his erection. Ren eyed him, her perceptions sharpened by panic. So it was a pale, snakeheaded thing in humans. How odd. And the smell, pale as well—

Redchest came right through the fence. Rearing, he hit the man squarely in the chest with the driving edges of his forehooves. Ren struggled to her feet and fought her way free of the rope as the rest of the mustangs came swirling out. She grabbed Redchest's mane and swung a foot over his back, only her heel giving her purchase, hanging on convulsively.

It is said that running horses will not deliberately trample a prone man. But these men were not prone; they were standing, screaming, and in the way. And it seemed to Ren that some spirit of vengeance was in Redchest, the way he pressed and panicked the mares, adding chaos to confusion. However it happened, three battered bodies awaited the coyotes when the stampede had passed. And three strange horses wandered the scrub, still in their heavy horned saddles and curbs.

Ren hung onto Redchest until the stallions had separated their spooked herds and until the hard gallop had slowed to a lope. Then, her strength gone, she dropped off and rolled to one side, thinking that they would canter past her. But Redchest slowed his pace and circled around to gather her in.

She stood dry-mouthed. There was only one reason he had saved her, could be only one reason, in the mind of a wild stallion, a herdmaster. He wanted service of her. She was one of his mares now. And she felt far more frightened of him than she had been of the humans. The human tool was puny compared with that of a stallion.

SEVERAL DAYS later the Escapists returned to their shantytown, puzzled and cautious, wondering what had happened to the sometime Feds. The horse girl had raided their food supplies while they were gone, but they felt fortunate. Things could have been far worse. They could have been in a military prison, or dead.

Up on the butte, around the same time, Ren began to leak blood,

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leaving it behind her on the lichen-covered rocks when she sat, scattering freckles of it when she walked. At first she could not comprehend what was happening, did not link the odd stains to herself at all. Then she explored with a finger and regarded the red smear with horror.

They hurt me, she thought.

That one foul touch had done this to her somehow; she was sure of it. Ren had been hurt many times: her body displayed the half-moon marks of horses' hooves that had struck with serious intent to maim. She had fended for herself through broken ribs, bruised organs, smashed collarbone. But this hurt seemed far less straightforward and more deadly. It was something psychic, unfathomable, sickening. It made her feel weak all through her tough young body. She suddenly squatted and voided gray-green, as if she had been eating sage with the horses.

The bleeding did not stop as a bleeding cut would, as she hoped it would. If anything, the blood flow seemed to increase over the next day and the next. Ren's newly swollen breasts hurt her as well, and, to her increased dismay, Redchest seemed interested in her again. Sometimes he followed her, smelling the place where she had been and shuddering in the peculiar way that horses have, vibrating his lips sensuously and showing his long yellow teeth.

Ren hated him. As if for the first time, she saw what a grotesque creature he was, he with his battered lop ears, his roman nose and patchy mongrel coloring. He trotted toward her, snorting and fluttering his nostrils, and Ren darted away. She scrambled up the steep rocks where she hoped the stallion would not trouble himself to follow. Atop the hogback, panting, she saw Redchest amble lazily back to his mares, but fear tightened her chest: she could not possibly have escaped him if he had been determined to gather her in.

Turning, Ren ran for the mine shaft, the only safe place she knew. Perhaps the man was gone.

He was not. There he sat at a small fire near the entrance, eating mesquite pods, chewing the tough things distastefully. He was still clean-shaven, and Ren felt an odd, watery sensation at the sight of him. After a moment she stopped hiding in the sagebrush and warily approached, desperate as she was to get into her refuge, her rimrock womb.

Aaron Prince peered and smiled. "Well, hello!" he exclaimed. "Come right in; pull up a piece of prairie. Are you hungry?" He offered her a

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mesquite pod, holding it out on his open palm. She did not take it from him or come any closer than she had to. She edged past him and down the mine shaft.

"Blood!" Prince blurted, startled. "Did I see blood? Are you hurt?" He pulled a flaming pine branch from his small fire and started after her. By the time he found her, she lay half buried in her bed of old, verminous, dark-stem straw. She was shivering.

"Are you hurt?" he asked anxiously. "I can't see any better than a bat. Tell you what — I'll go get Doc. We have a doc, you know. He used to be a paramedic with the San Diego Fire Department. I'll be right back."

He started off, turned back to leave her a handful of mesquite pods, reappeared yet again to place a pan of water where she could reach it, and finally hurried away.

Sometime later she saw the pine flare again, heard the two men approaching. "You sure she don't bite?" a gruff voice was saying.

"I just don't think she will, that's all. Is she still there? I can't see—"

"I'll say. If you could, you wouldn't be bothering with her." The man gave a short laugh. "Yeah, she's still there."

"Well, what's the matter with her?" Prince asked anxiously.

The other man edged forward with a soothing muttering, as if he were dealing with a nervous animal. Ren trembled violently, but did not bare her teeth. Though she did not know it in any reasoning way, she had left the wild herd for good. By her submission to being approached, she was committing herself to the human herd.

"Bring that light here," said Doc. He looked carefully, but did not touch.

"Maybe she *thinks* she's hurt," he said finally, "but it looks like menses to me." He snorted.

"What?" said Aaron.

"She needs a Kotex."

"Oh. Well, let's leave her alone, then."

They trudged back up the mine shaft. "Stay for supper?" Aaron offered.

"What're you having?"

"Cattle feed. Mesquite pods."

"Oh." The other grimaced, but nodded nevertheless. "O.K., thanks. That's better than what I was having."

"What was that?"

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"Air." Doc snickered noiselessly. "What's your name again?" he asked.

"Prince. Aaron Prince."

Doc let out a short, explosive bark of laughter.

"Prince!" he yelled. "Well, if you're a prince, then she's a goddamn princess!" He jabbed his thumb toward the darkness behind them.

"You're none too sweet-smelling yourself," Aaron said evenly.

"That's true." Not at all offended, Doc laughed some more. "I'll send you my bill." They both knew his supper was the only payment he would be getting.

When Ren hesitantly approached the fire sometime later, the men were still eating.

"Are you feeling any better?" Aaron asked her.

The girl said nothing. She sat near enough to warm herself, but as far from the men as she could.

"Can you talk at all?" Aaron asked curiously. "Do you have a name?"

Her lips moved. The sound was barely audible.

"What?"

"Ren?" she whispered.

"Wren?" Prince was puzzled. He had seen no wrens in these bleak uplands.

"Sren." She knew it was not Ren, exactly.

"Karen?"

The girl violently shook her head. "En!" she blurted.

"Ann?"

"No. S-endy." Her mouth moved tortuously, trying to capture the word.

"She's the living End," Doc joked dourly. "The bloody living End." Pleased by his own wit, he laughed.

"Never mind, Princess." Aaron leaned back and grinned at Doc. "We'll call you Princess. Right, Doc?"

"I guess so," said Doc. Snickering, he got up and stumped away.

The seeress sat atop her peak and prayed. She wore only the traditional sackcloth, and her black skin hung in folds around her. She had once been fat, but she was not fat any longer. Nor did she care. Her prayers were for one thing and one thing only: the preservation of her own life. She had chosen her icy mountaintop for that purpose, hoping at the altitude to be the more easily lifted up to Heaven when the seas turned to blood and the rain of fire began.

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Her face had paled from chocolate to the gray-brown-purple color of a flea. She did not know how she was going to survive the winter. Even the summer had been bad enough, sitting amid the snow that never melted — but it did not matter. No one would be lasting much longer. The millennium was at hand. Any week, any day now, she felt sure, the end would come.

Therefore, the cold did not concern her. And there was always water enough, from snow, and pilgrims toiled up the slopes every few days to bring her supplies. There were Mormons, mostly, excellent people with their own notions of judgment and survival. Of course, she could never have been a prophet in their church, since she was a woman and she was black, but she considered them excellent people nevertheless. It caused her some small compunction to tell them they were doomed.

But doom was sure. She counted over the signs. False prophets, including the leaders of the Mormons. Wars and rumors of war, billions spent for defense. Shameful sexual diseases, plagues, famines and earthquakes — she felt sure there must have been an earthquake somewhere lately — and hardship; money not worth a thing anymore; and crime; the nations in agony; and most unnatural murder; and filth, most unnatural; the abomination of desolation set up. She frowned, thinking of the phallus, filthy idol of modern times. Vengeance would come on a white horse. Now she awaited only the dimming of the sun, moon, and stars. . . .

The sibyl shivered amid the eversnow, curling her gray and naked feet under her thin haunches. If she had had any sense of humor, she might have considered how a rain of fire could provide a certain fleeting relief. But she had no sense of humor, none at all, so she did not.

Ren stayed in her bed of soiled straw for three days, shivering with chills and cramps, and Aaron Prince brought her water and whatever food he could find. After that the blood flow stopped as suddenly as it had begun. Ren felt far better. In fact, she felt well in a new and different way, aglow, uplifted, and she was not experienced enough to be suspicious of the change. She fully credited Prince with healing her, saving her from bleeding to death — how could it be otherwise? His friendliness, his concern, his amused acceptance of her, sent warm waves of healing through her every day. She could feel this new thing happening. In her straightforward thinking, she felt sure she owed him her life, and once she was

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well, she set about trying to please him in any way she could.

There were ways. She brought him wood. He used it for his carving as well as for firewood. He had a knife, and he would attempt to whittle wooden spoons and cups and gadgets to be traded for scant necessities. She changed her bedding for the first time in years, gathering fresh straw from the sere slopes. Aaron had his own bed of tattered blankets. She brought water and, whenever she could, she brought food.

That was the main and most obvious way. She could no longer steal from the Scapists now that she was human — not because of any sense of loyalty or morality, but because she was vulnerable now; she had joined their herd; she would need them. But her years as a parasite, a flea on the back of fate, had taught her other forms of thievery. She knew how to follow a coyote hunt and steal the meat. She knew where the ground squirrels hid their stores.

"What's this?" Aaron asked when first she brought him her carefully cherished handfuls. "Birdseed? Well, it beats starving. Thank you, Princess."

"Thank you," she muttered, trying the word, the unheard-of courtesy.

"You're welcome," said Prince.

"You're welcome," she repeated.

He was her mentor. He talked to her often — he liked to talk — and she understood more each day, whether she was learning quickly or simply remembering what had been forgotten. When she did not understand what he was saying, she would ask, "What does it mean?", and he would explain. From time to time he would enter into short didactic excursions on his own. He liked to teach. As it became appropriate, no more than once a day, he would give the girl gentle directives about the proper ways to do things, never hurrying her, but nevertheless taking her in hand, shaping her. She adored him, never questioning his liturgies, and he liked that, leading her along as quickly as she could comfortably manage to follow. Her presence filled his monotonous days, and helping her gave him a marvelous feeling of virtue and power.

By the time her menses came again, when the aspen leaves had turned from yellow to rust and fallen, lying as brown as dried blood, he was able to explain it to her.

"All my life?" she said numbly.

"Yes." Some things had to be kept simple. Besides, she was not likely

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"I need my name. I need my mother," she said resolutely. "Then I will be real."

to live long enough to experience menopause. None of them were likely to live much longer.

"But — but what have I done?"

"Nothing! It is because you will be a woman."

Ren shook her head, dismayed. The mares had their monthly discharge when they were not with foal, but it was a few maroon stains hidden beneath their tails, never such a flood as this. She thought back to the marauding Feds at the bronc pen, then to the early days, her small self standing and suckling milk from an accommodating mare, abandoned.

"I must have been born evil," she said. "Even my mother did not want me."

"Nonsense! She lost you, or perhaps she was killed. There was a lot of killing in those days. As there is now."

Ren looked at him doubtfully. "What is a bitch?" she asked.

"Where did you hear that?" Prince hedged.

"My — the people called me bitch; they threw stones at me; they called me other things as well."

"They did not mean it," said Aaron. "They were just angry." He got her a rag by way of diaper and showed her how to wind it around herself. From time to time he would send her down to wash it out in the river.

Aaron whittled mightily, and a few days later he went trading. He returned from Scapesville with somebody's too-small pink polyester dress.

"Here, Princess," he said.

"What is it?" She did not understand the formless draggle of cloth.

He helped her on with it, and then stood back, admiring her, soft-focus. "There!" he exclaimed. "Now you are a real princess."

"I need my name to be real," she said.

"Huh?" He wondered if he had heard correctly.

"I need my name. I need my mother," she said resolutely. "Then I will be real."

Aaron Prince disliked crisis scenes. "Don't you like the dress?" he asked in caressing tones.

In fact, she did not. She found it nearly as irksome as the swaddling

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loincloth. But she already knew that a princess is not allowed to tell truth. She accepted this as she accepted the other strictures of her Adonis. Also, she evaded the question.

"Will they throw stones at me now?" she asked.

"No, of course not. They'll love you now," said Aaron, though in fact he could not be sure.

"I will go and find my name." She started off down the stony slope toward the cardboard huts below, and in astonishment he watched her go, though she was no more than a blur to him.

She had not meant to stay for long, knowing that she would soon wish to be with Prince again. But one night spent in someone's woodshed led to another until she had been in Scapesville a week, and still no news of her mother.

The first snow fell. The Escapists had not thrown stones at her, but they were cold and worried and quarreling among themselves. No one knew how they were going to make it through the winter. They had nearly denuded the nearby terrain of firewood and killed or driven away the wildlife. They had fished the river out and gathered all there was of forage and harvested their straggling gardens, and still it was not nearly enough. An expedition sent for supplies had returned empty-handed. Some of them wanted to launch a raid against the Mormons, they with their barrels of wheat in their snug basements. Others pointed out their lack of proper weapons and called for caution and a tightening of belts. Of the world at large, it was rumored that there was war, that the Feds would be coming in search of manpower. There was talk of atrocities in the military camps, talk of imprisonment without appeal and retaliations against families.

"The world is coming to an end anyway, old Black Cassandra says," someone joked dourly. Nobody laughed.

"I doubt if we'll make it till then," said somebody else.

"If that old black bitch can sit up on that mountaintop and still be alive. . . ." The woman, huddled in her ragged blanket, let her voice trail away. No one said any more. They all looked at Rendy.

She did not feel the cold. She went about in her bare feet and short dress, and if anyone had asked her for the dress, she would have taken it off and given it to them. The Scapists were grudgingly grateful that she no longer raided their meager supplies of food, wasting more than she ate.

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She worked willingly and slept anywhere and dug turtles out of the half-frozen mud of the riverbank, somehow finding the traces that the others overlooked. So they did not too much mind having her with them. They even gave her some old or useless clothing. But they did not answer her questions. When she asked if they had known her mother, some of them laughed in an odd way, and others shook their heads.

Winter came in earnest. The people of Scapesville turned grim, their faces white and pinched.

"What we need," said Doc genially, "is a party."

"The world is coming to an end," someone sniffed. "We are all going to starve if we don't die of cold first, and he wants a party."

"Sure! What better time? I've got something you'll all like." He winked. "Been saving it for a special occasion."

Ren did not understand "party" at first. But when she gathered that there was to be a meeting and a celebration of some sort at Doc's dugout, she went to him.

"Is Prince coming?" she asked.

"Why, I never thought!" He laughed uproariously. "Why sure, sweetheart, I'll invite him. I'll hike up there myself."

With desperation nudging at them like a glinting knife, everyone became brightly excited about "Doc's bash." There were preparations and primpings and brittle laughter. Ren watched and imitated. She combed her long hair and tied it with colorful strips of cloth — top, middle, and bottom — so that it swung behind her like a horse's switch when she walked. Someone had given her a shimmering party dress. It was a nightgown, but she didn't know that. She put it on, and forced her feet into a pair of strappy plastic shoes with two-inch heels, and asked the women for something to go around her neck, something like the beads and chains she saw them wearing. They gave her a necklace made of beer-can tabs and joked about her perfume. Ren wondered why they were laughing at her. She went to Doc's den and watched the party begin.

The small sod-roofed dugout became so crowded with bodies that everyone was truly warm. Even the men were dressed up in an oddly mismatched way, three-piece suits with battered work boots, sport coats over wrinkled shirts and faded jeans, makeshift bow ties made of bandannas. Prince came in wearing somebody's pink ruffled tuxedo shirt, his fine jawline riding above the high collar. Ren stared at him, feeling her

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insides melt again. But in the blur of dim lights and bodies, he did not notice her until she went up to him.

"Princess?" he exclaimed in astonishment, and there was laughter from those who stood close enough to hear.

Doc's surprise tour de force turned out to be peyote — how he had gotten it, no one knew, for it grew much farther south. Everyone chewed it and found it to be highly effective on an empty stomach. Feds, war, hunger, and world's doom all faded into insignificance. Candle flames swelled to gigantic proportion and unheard-of color. Earnest and unintelligible conversation took place.

"Shasta's coming back!" someone shouted. "Everybody remember Shasta?"

"A-a-ay!" the men yelped, then laughed. One of the women turned to Ren.

"Honey," she said solemnly, "I bet maybe that black lady on the mountain knows something about your mom."

Doc had drinks made of water mixed with powders of some sort; not the usual sort, Prince said. And he had a few pills of various kinds. He managed to barter for medical supplies from time to time.

Prince selected two pills and downed them with a gulp of yellow water. No one offered Ren a pill. She had a peyote button, but she disliked the bitter taste of the thing and secretly spat it out. Since she had never been to a party before, she did not know what to expect. She watched. The people who were standing were swaying oddly, rubbing their bodies together, and there was a familiar musky smell. . . . With a shock, Ren realized that they were thinking of mating, and that humans must do it face-to-face. She had always thought of them as mounting like the horses.

Other people were sitting slumped and humming. A candle sputtered out, and no one cared. Doc threw a powder on the fire so that a sweet, spicy smoke went up, and two men suddenly took to fighting, sparring like stallions, knives flashing. They fell. A woman was standing on the table, singing. She did not sing particularly well, Ren thought. More of the candles went out.

Someone touched her. It was Prince. He got her by the wrist and wordlessly tugged her into a corner, pushed her down on the dirt floor. No one seemed to notice or care. He unbuckled his belt, and she stiffened at the clink of it, reminded of that other time. She could see his tool, phosphor-

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white in the dim light. But then he leaned over her and kissed her. .

No one had ever done that before.

Redchest, when he mated a mare, would cover her with no preamble except a warning squeal as he drove in on her, ears laid back, head lowered and snaking. Some of the other stallions, Ren knew, nuzzled their mares and nibbled and licked them from muzzle to rump. . . . Prince's nuzzling: as sensuous as a stallion's, but far gentler. His excitement: the same, but more patient. Prince was leisurely. In fact, he was stoned and somewhat clumsy, but his uncertain attentions thrilled Ren. She adored him. She would do anything for him. Awkwardly, she moved her lips the way he moved his, and helped him to take off her clothes.

She did not feel much arousal, not knowing that she was supposed to. There was some pain, not too much, and she did not mind it. The main thing in her thoughts, as he held her very tightly, resting atop her afterward, was that it was good to be held so close, so warmly, embraced in gentle arms. Somewhat as a loving mother's arms might once have held her, when she was much smaller. Though she could not remember that.

And what was it that some woman had said about her mother . . . ?

When Prince came groggily back to awareness the next day, Ren was gone. His vision being even more blurred than usual, it took him some time to ascertain that this was indeed so. Fellow sufferers, awakening to postparty nausea, eventually affirmed that he was correct: she was nowhere to be seen. They were not very concerned, being preoccupied with the two dead men on the floor.

"We should do this more often," Doc quipped. "Fewer mouths to feed."

"Where could she be?" Aaron wondered aloud, remembering the night before as if through an orange cloud, feeling a hot flush of compunction. She had been a virgin for sure — and he hoped he had been gentle; he thought he had been gentle — and she had been sweet, so sweet. She had kissed him back, and it seemed to him that he had seen her, every detail, in the dark and without glasses, amid the flickering, many-colored lights of peyote in his head: he had seen with great clarity her sweet mound and the red tips of her small breasts. He had kissed her breasts and eased the pulsing blue-white of his flesh into —

"Did you have a good time?" Doc asked wickedly.

"Where is she?" Aaron demanded.

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"Your sagebrush Cinderella? How should I know? But it's a good thing if she's gone. Somebody said they saw her mother down the road yesterday. She's coming back to Scape City."

"But —" Prince could not deal with this, not in his confused state. "She wanted to find her mother," he managed.

"Best if she don't."

"But why?" he asked, and later: "Where is she?"

No one was answering. He gave up on them all and stumbled back to the mine shaft, hoping — no. The girl was not there. Feeling responsible for her somehow, and with hot memories flickering and prickling in his befuddled mind, he climbed the rimrock, then the hogback beyond it, trying to get a view of the gray winter day. Clouds were piling up over the mountains; a storm was mixing. There were mustangs in the river gorge. He noticed a big plug of a stallion with an odd reddish patch of hair between its forelegs. But not a sign of the girl did he see. She was really gone. He could only assume she still existed somewhere.

Sunset was fire red. Later on that night he noticed there was blood on the moon.

Nearing the mountaintop, Ren pushed her way through waist-deep snow. More snow filled the air and shut out the sky. Though she wore shoes and jeans and two layers of clothing, for the first time in her life, Ren was feeling the cold as humans feel it. She was shivering by the time she came before the sibyl.

The woman sat like a black lingam, sunk in her own hips and in snow. A spasm of vexation moved her purple-brown face as she realized the girl brought no food or offering of any sort, but the emotion quickly passed into impassivity. She sat like carved mahogany, expressionless, waiting.

"I want to know my name," said Ren.

The black woman laughed softly, a fleshy, soughing sound that blended with the wind all around. "How should I know your name?" she said. "Ask your mother."

"Who is my mother?"

The laugh again, a knowing laugh. Ren knew a knowing laugh by then. "Don't look at me," Black Cassandra told her ironically, extending a plum-colored hand. "We're of different breeds, child."

Deliberately, Ren sat down in the snow and looked at her. It took the

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seeress a moment to realize that the gaze was intended as defiance. Then she shouted at the girl.

"What do you want to know for?" she yelled angrily. "She'll get her reward soon enough, and so will you. You wait. Everything'll turn upside down and inside out. The mountains'll move. The sea'll turn to blood and boil, and the Beast'll come out of it. The sun'll go dark, and then the end will come." The woman's tone turned from anger to exaltation. "In war and hunger and sickness and the fear of wild beasts — all unnatural things and the wild beasts. The end will come in the tramplings of horses and the lust of horses." She glared at the girl in fierce horror, and, as Ren had no answer, she went on.

"You wait. You'll see the four horses, the white and red and black and the yellow one, a-trampling and a-snorting, and there'll be sulfur coming out of their nostrils and their tails'll be like snakes and they'll sting like scorpions and the Beast'll crawl out of the bottomless pit. And the whole world'll go into travail like a woman having a baby. And the abomination of desolation will be set up—"

"What's that?" Ren asked. She was listening with tingling fascination. She had always known the earth could do it, too, like and wriggle under the thrusting tool as she had with Prince. If the mine shaft was the bottomless pit, then the other thing had to be—

"The tool of Baal!" snapped the sibyl. "The great fornicating phallus, you little whore, and don't you forget it when the earth quakes and the thunder and lightning come and the stars fall down like rotten apples. And when the pit opens up and there's fire and brimstone a-burning down below—"

"I don't care about that," Ren said. "I still want to know about my mother."

"So you'll know her when you meet her in the fiery place?" the woman said callously. "Whore. She was a whore, too."

So the old black crazy did know her! Ren had felt sure she did, and those other women, too, the ones who laughed.

"Who was she?" Ren leaned forward. "What was her name?"

"She didn't have no proper name. She called herself Shasta." The sibyl spat sideways into the snow. "She was one of them fools that followed the false prophet, that Zen or whatever he called himself. Her punishment is assured."

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"You mean she died?"

"Not yet, child." Black Cassandra grinned crookedly, her teeth showing gray in her purplish face. "Give it time. Any day, now."

"But Prince told me she must have died. That's how I ended up with the horses."

The seeress let out a sharp clap of laughter. Cold and her vigil on the mountaintop had worn her down to elemental urges, and her urge was toward cruelty. The end was very near, looming like a weapon poised to strike, and the girl annoyed her with her petty questions.

"Died?" she yelled. "Lord, no. Don't let them tell you she lost you, either. She left you cold, child. She didn't want you no more, and she went off. I guess she just figured you would die yourself." The sibyl laughed some more, thinking of all the ways and forms of dying.

Ren sat as if frozen. "I must have been born evil," she whispered.

"Amen," Cassandra intoned.

"My — my name. What is my name? She must have given me a name."

The woman laughed, rocking gently where she sat, contemplating a cosmic joke. "You got one, all right, but I ain't telling you," she declared at last. "Ask your ma when you see her."

A sharp edge of finality glinted in her voice. Ren got up woodenly and trudged away, limping with cold. Cassandra looked after her.

"It'll come in the trampling of horses and the lust of horses and the raging of wild beasts," the old woman muttered. "And the unnatural acts of beasts."

REN RETURNED to Scapesville-of-Cardboard, worn down to a skeleton by travel and hunger and freezing winter, skin stretched taut and almost transparent over her half-grown bones, and looked down on the shantytown, and noted the patches of blood in the snow. Scape City loomed corrugated and haphazard in the snowy dusk, and the Feds were just moving in for their mopping up, their uniforms dark, their shouts thin in the snowy hush. Bursts of gunfire sounded.

They had not seen her. Ren put the hip of the butte between her and the soldiers, then plodded up the sage-dotted slope toward the mine shaft, dark and warm as a womb, her bed in it, and Prince. She did not know that she loved him, for she did not think in those terms, but she knew that

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he had mated her and by herd right she was his.

She paused at the oval entry hole to catch her breath, for she felt very weak. Then she stumbled down along the rotting rails. Once within the underground sanctuary, she could no longer hear the distant screams and gunshots from Scapesville. Indeed, in the dense, moist darkness ahead of her, she heard stirrings—

Soft movements and giggles and the murmur of secret talk. "Wait a minute," she heard Prince say. "Someone's coming. Who's there?"

"Me," Ren whispered.

"Princess?" said Aaron, incredulous, his voice rising to a squeak. "We thought you were long gone! Are you all right? Here, let me get a light."

An electric torch shone out — now, where in the dismal world had he gotten such a thing? Ren thought. Balanced upright, it made a moonlike circle on the low timbered roof and cast a dim, reflected glow on the bed below. Prince and the woman lay there beneath their blankets, and Prince reached for an apparatus of glass and wire, positioned it on his nose.

"Doc got me glasses," he said proudly, but then what he saw with the glasses shocked him into silence.

"What is it?" the woman asked, and then with a feathery laugh: "I mean, who is it?"

Ren stared at her. She was older than Prince but still very pretty, with a blank smoothness to her face that Ren had never seen in anyone that age.

"It's Princess," Aaron said. Hurriedly, pulling tatters of civility around himself, he made the introduction. "Shasta, this is Princess, the horse girl. Princess, this is Shasta."

"Me'n'Aaron are gonna make babies," said Shasta with a bubbling laugh. She got up naked out of the blanket and stood carelessly asserting her dominance, the smoothness and plumpness of her breasts and belly and love-handled hips, the marelike, straddle-legged poise of her maturity.

Prince stayed where he was. Ren glared at him, telling him to choose, and the choice was not hard for him. One motherly succubus versus one scarred scarecrow. No contest.

"Yes, Princess," he blurted, "you can't stay here."

"I like babies," said Shasta, fluffing up her hair with clawed fingers. "They're so sweet and cuddly, and they don't never talk back. I breast feed 'em for as long as I can. Ooh, that feels good when they suck at your breast! Once they ain't babies, I don't want 'em no more." She laughed vacuously,

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aware that her bodily charm made all things right when she laughed.

"The name," Ren whispered.

"Huh, honey?"

"Do you give them names?" Ren asked more loudly.

"Sure, I give 'em good Zen names. Karma, Samsara, Enlightenment, Serenity—"

That was it. She remembered clearly now the voice out of her past. *Serenity, you little bitch, get out now, get out of my life—*

And then the mare's milk. "That's it," Ren muttered, turning away. She stopped just outside the circle of light. "What does Serenity mean?" she asked.

"Why, the ineffable peace, honey. The feeling you get inside after sex." Shasta laughed, snuggling into her bed again. Embarrassed, Prince did not speak.

"Bye, Aaron Prince," Ren said in a hard tone he had never heard from her before. She trudged up the mine shaft in the dark. Shasta laid a long hand with bright red nails on the fine line of hair just below Prince's navel, then inched her touch downward.

"Who is that ugly little brat?" she asked. "Surely you ain't been—"

Quickly, Aaron shook his head. "She's just a sort of — orphan."

"That's a funny name for her," said Shasta, stroking. "Princess."

Not as funny as the real one, Prince thought, stoppering Shasta's mouth with his lips to keep her from talking.

"Oh. Just in case you care," Ren called down from the entry in the same hard voice, "the Feds are coming." Then she stepped out into the snow and started up the butte toward where the wild horses would be sheltering in the black shadows of the pines.

She found them sooner, in the lee of the rimrock, and one of them came trotting to meet her with a snort.

"Redchest," she whispered, feeling a jolt of the old fear.

Grotesque, pied a clownish white, black, yellow, and blood-bay red, he loomed against the snow-speckled, dusky sky. The stallion. Coming up to her, he sniffed her face and squealed with foolish excitement, and suddenly, softly, Ren laughed.

"You jackass," she told him, "I am a human."

A skeletal human in sodden jeans, two moth-eaten sweaters, and a pair

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of overlarge shoes. A human who was swiftly learning that survival meant mastery, nothing less. Mastery, and maybe revenge. . . . With her fist she hit the stud hard on his tender nose, sending him shying backward before he reared and screeched in protest.

"Git!" she yelled at him, and he cantered back to his herd.

Cathips, Blacklegs, Spot, Bigrump, Bonymare, Gray. Even in the dusk, Ren could see Gray flashing and flagging. Some of the mares came in heat only in the spring and early summer, but Gray never seemed to foal anymore, and required Redchest's attentions all year round. She was signaling strongly for him now, and he began snaking his head in response.

The round bellies of the others showed them to be in foal. Ren went quietly over and caught Blacklegs by her long mane, ready to ride her. If any Feds came up the butte, the mustangs would spook and carry her far away.

Gunshots in the distance. Then a nearer disturbance. Seven long, heavy heads raised and swiveled; seven sets of ears shot up. But the mustangs did not trouble themselves to bolt. It was only a plump and naked woman running up the slope, breasts bouncing like puppets, panting out small cries that echoed in the twilight. Beyond the woman, Ren could see dark uniforms against the snow, and the slumped tadpole shape of the man they dragged between them, and the other dark, straight-shouldered forms of the Feds who followed Shasta like dogs trailing an alluring bitch.

"Oh!" Shasta cried, running from the soldiers. "Oh! Aaron! Oh!"

Ren smiled with tight lips, let go of Blacklegs, and went over and caught Gray by the mane for Shasta.

Redchest was quick. No lip-play and nuzzling in Redchest. There might be time for him to service Gray before the herd was spooked. He killed for me once before, Ren thought. He might do it again.

"Oh!" gasped Shasta, bobbling up. "Gimme that horse, girl." She shoved Ren out of her way and scrambled onto Gray.

The bronc did not buck, even in response to Shasta's bare, kicking heels. Gray was intent of Redchest, standing with tail to one side, hooves set wide and legs braced, stiffly awaiting the stallion. Still smiling, Ren went back to Blacklegs.

"They took Aaron," Shasta panted. "Oh!"

Those were the last words she ever spoke. The stallion lunged.

Shasta's scream echoed like nothing Ren had ever heard.

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Then there was a fearsome noise, an even louder noise, an explosion, and fire broke out in the river valley, blazing high. There were shouts and screams and cinders in the sky. Black Cassandra on her Neversummer mountaintop saw and cackled out loud at the streams of fire and the falling stars. For it looked as if the earth had loosed the fire in its loins at last, opened its penetralia, hot in its bed of night, and the final orgasmic shudder would come; the mountains would ponderously move and embrace. Ren nearly screamed herself; she felt the butte shuddering underfoot. It looked and felt like the end of the world. But it was not. It was just the Feds blowing up the shantytown.

The mustangs screamed, though Ren did not, and reared, and bolted. Black, white, yellow, and blood red, they galloped through the snowy nightfall, four abreast, and an ample body lay crushed behind them, and a stark skeleton of a girl rode one of them like the Grim Reaper himself: her smile, like a death mask, serene.

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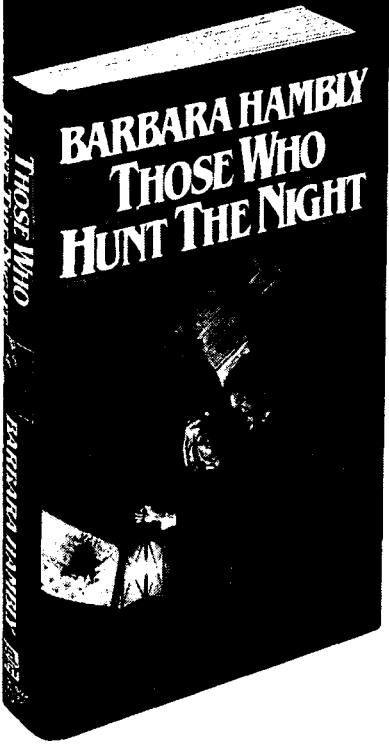

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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

Wyvern, A.A. Attanasio, Ticknor & Fields, $19.95

Touch, Elmore Leonard, Avon, $4.50

WORKING ON Peter Straub's *Koko* last month caused me to come up, once again, against the heaviest taxonomic problem in speculative fiction: defining "fantasy." Once again, I chickened out, talking around it, deferring the day when I'd be forced to confront it. Well, God sees but waits. Sometimes doesn't wait all that long. Here it is again, with what Ticknor & Fields calls a historical novel, and what Avon (reprinting a Morrow book from last year) has packaged as a crime thriller. Both of them are fantasy; I know that when I point to them. Ah, but what do I mean?

Defining "classical fantasy" has never been a problem. It's a body of literature restricted to stories containing mythological figures as active participants, take your pick of any body of folklore or, if a culture is safely dead, any body of "myth."

However, that puts you into a complicated position. "Classical" only means "that stuff we're all accustomed to having around"; "folklore" has never been defined in terms of the minimum number of folk required to make a notion a lore; and what we call "myth" is invariably what its promulgators called "religion," and would attempt to kill you if you told them it belonged in the same box with that superstitious nonsense held-to by those folks over in the next valley.

Which is why I have never been totally comfortable as a critic since that now long-ago day when Thomas Tryon published *The Other*, have been actively scratching since William Peter Blatty, and dancing on the head of a red-hot pin when pondering the work of Andrew M. Greeley. It's all well and good to read an *Unknown* magazine story in which one of Henry Kuttner's nerd protagonists attempts to create a bulletproof contract with The Devil. The Devil in an *Unknown*

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story is obviously a strawman; any corporate attorney in new clothes.

Satan — note the shift in labelling — is still a bidable figure, though much more terrifying, in novels like *Silverlock*. It's basically a picquaresque adventure novel with an insouciant hero, and though one of his perilous episodes literally takes him to Hell, where Lucifer Sathanas is someone who would never for a minute condescend to play games on the nerd level, still and all you've seen plenty of previous episodes in which the hero's combination of bravado, energy, and dumb luck has gotten him out of scrapes, and you can safely assume it's the author's basic intent to show you he can even get out of *this* bind.

So we're O.K. so far.

Howard Phillips Lovecraft, now, began cutting closer to the nerve-endings. If you don't try to be a smartass, Kuttner's Devil is easily avoided. If you don't muck about like Silverlock, you'll be O.K. —and most of us know, deep down, that we're not really the picaro type. But in HPL's canon, you can get it in the neck at any time for no reason at all, and furthermore there is *nothing* you can do about it. Cthulhu gets you; worse, there's a definite sense that Cthulhu doesn't care who you are or what you think; the old boy was on his way to someplace he had his mind on, and you were a woodchuck on the highway.

There are a couple of interesting things about that. One of them is that Cthulhu plays the same part as the various gods and demigods in the antique Greek mythos . . . and thereby in classical Greek drama. The other one is that he plays the kind of Jehovah who haunts the lives of a quite respectable number of sincere religionists, but HPL was sapient enough not to call him that.*

Considered purely as a commercial writer, Lovecraft was a miserable failure, though he had plenty of piety and wit in most other aspects of his art. But he would have been in much worse case if he hadn't "invented" his own mythos by renaming some existing ikons of extremely long standing. It's one thing to be pumelled all your life by rejection slips; it's another to be burned at the stake.†

Now, from Greek drama via Lovecraft we have derived a large part of the work of Stephen King. The Gods have their own concerns, and the various sprites and genii locii perturbed by their activities

**Don't worry, there'll be a footnote coming along any minute now, but not here.*

†*"Burned at the stake" in the modern context is to have been publicly labelled a fanatic, and thus unemployable.*

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now and then collide with we woodchucks. Occasionally, this affects some god directly, and then watch out, rodent, because having them like you is as bad as having them not like you. Whether the pitcher hits the stone or the stone hits the pitcher, it's bad for the pitcher.

But King, though he often plots Greek, is a bit contaminated by the later literary traditions; usually, though not always, the woodchuck-figures can escape, though not unscathed, if they but be loyal, brave and trustworthy in sufficient measure. That is, King bows, occasionally, to the modern storytelling conventions based on the Protestant ethic of rectitudinous sweat. And that whole school of modern horror-writing which follows him does pretty much the same, and thus sidesteps the problem we're dealing with here today.

True, the body of literature produced by these contemporary "horror" writers is not unified by invariably containing an element of the supernatural. So they seem to pop inexplicably in and out of "speculative fiction" but don't seem to care what violence they're doing to everyone's card-files and PhD theses. However, they *are* unified by their common thread of following the Greek plot-structure, at least up to the point where the God in The Basket would have been lowered onstage to reposition the hopelessly entangled woodchucks; sometimes including it. And the fact that they present another problem in grasping the essential nature of all speculative fiction, including science fiction, is not primarily germane to the really thorny one we're forging through today.

It's bad enough that sweat-ethic plot-turns were developed to appeal to an audience of Protestants — that is, a body of people who number among them a large bloc of persons with a deep-seated emotional commitment to the Yahweh universe, which means that liking sweat-ethic fiction can put you up close and personal on the question of free will versus predestination, the Lamb of God and Being Washed in The Blood of The Lamb. Clearly, there is plenty of room for paradox in whoever's universe it really is.

What's worse is when you try to deal with the universe of Tryon, Blatty, and Greeley.*

**I once, in these pages, said Greeley, a priest, had been a Chicago alderman. I muddled together two very different figures associated with the Chicago Church. Father Edward Drinan has not been much heard from in public since Rome sent the word down to Cool It. Father Greeley, as F&SF readers surely know, continues to publish some rather likeable work.*

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The common factor in this universe is that the "mythos" of Roman Catholicism is taken to be literally true, and the Roman Church is a living ethical system. When Henry Kuttner deals with The Devil, it's an intellectual proposition. Even when Silverlock stands in Hell and John Myers Myers makes it quite convincingly awesome to do so, there is plenty of room to sit back in your mind and say, "*If* there were a Satan, then this could be true, and let us examine it in detail to play the game of seeing whether the author's construct on this proposition is logically rigorous." This Big If is what keeps all that "classical" fantasy from getting too personal. What the Blatty universe does is to remove the Big If. "There *is* a Satan, he *is* satanic, he is attached by a host of lesser but puissant beings, and it's always possible one or more of them *will* get you on his behalf."

Then it introduces another of kind of if: "If this happens, here's how it might be handled by strict reference to only the Catholic ethical system in which Satan exists." So that — unless, perhaps, you're a Catholic theologian with much experience in that type of rumination, so that it is your work more than it is where *you* live — it is not possible to read these fictions in the way classical fantasy is read. If you're Catholic, Roman or almost any other kind, these particular works touch directly on the faith you refer to countless times a day; it's a directly emotional experience, with intellection coming only second. If you're not Catholic, it's cryptic intellectually at best, risible or hateful at worst.

The very fact of the existence of this religion in contemporary society makes of this body of work something that is a different sort of fantasy. Example: If you know there are millions of readers who are Catholic, then you know that, strictly speaking, to millions of readers these works are not in fact fantasy. And there goes the "I know what I mean when I point to it" definition. With Blatty works, you are not making an intellectual statement there, you are making a religious declaration.

Now, I hope you didn't think Blatty-type fiction was where my discussion was going to stay centered. Because it's not. There's a living religion to which every man, woman and child on Earth adheres 'way down deep. That's Animism. In its most attenuated forms — which are the usual forms — this belief-system is expressed in not stepping on cracks in the sidewalk, or in having a lucky number. Some-

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where farther up the scale of intensity are concepts like Murphy's Law. Plainly visible codifications of it occur in Voodoo, or the bulk of antique Greek mythology.

Essentially, Animism stems from the deep-seated feeling that the material manifestations of the universe, each of which presents an appearance of independence from all others, most of which — the "inanimate" objects — apparently cannot produce causality, are actually linked in some vast system of hidden causes-and-effects in which they can be manipulated to explain or cause changes.

This belief is not something most of us acknowledge in ourselves every day. But we act on it constantly. I have never seen anyone who was not a practicing member of that religion, in some degree of good standing.

Which brings us to *Wyvern*, which is a lot like *Koko* only in that it founds its supernatural aspects in the Orient, where the distinction between Animist reality and what westerners usually call the real world barely exists.

Wyvern is initially set in seventeenth-century Borneo, and during the first third of this long book all the central characters are natives. However, the boy who will become known as Jaki Gefjen, the pirate — er, merchant-adventurer — is Matumbrembrem, the Demon-Child, apprenticed to a soul-catcher, ostensibly so that he may become a sorcerer, actually so that he may be caused by a confluence of influences to be the prophesied embodiment of the end of Life. Only if you believe that Borneans in the 1600s could command and converse with animals and ride rhinocerii, or that it is a natural phenomenon for a sacred place to suffer volcanic destruction as soon as its religious purpose is fulfilled, is this truly a historical novel.

Attanasio stays entirely inside that ethical system. In the next third of the book, Jaki apprentices to Captain Pym, surely the Leonardo da Vinci of pirates, with his fabulous ship *Wyvern*. Despite having studied at Oxford, Pym immediately volunteers a view of Life and Death, love and pain, and cause and effect, that he and his crew would willingly die for, and it's almost totally the same as Jaki's. It is both gruesome and exhalted, only subtly not sadomasochistic, and, q. e. d., both savage and ultracivilized. Similarly, a Mohammedan sailor Jaki befriends quickly weaves the foundations of Islamic belief into the same structure.

And it takes hold of one. With his unswerving faithfulness to this way of looking at the world, Attanasio soon has you looking out the

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window to see what the clouds portend and what the wind is conveying to the stars. It all fits together, seamlessly, and by the time you get to Page 422, you may not know what to call your Animism, but you do know that this book has moved something in you that goes deeper than intellectual proposition.

It's not, in fact, a technical masterpiece. Attanasio, despite years of professional publication, paces things badly, creates inadvertant anticlimaxes, dulls surprises, and motivates his characters rather forcibly. But while these shortcomings make less of this narrative than it might be, they don't do anything significant to mitigate the emotional impact. This book hits you where you live, even if you didn't know you lived there, and even if you decide afterward that, no, you didn't really, well, *believe* the universe actually runs on that basis.

Similarly, Elmore Leonard's *Touch* is set in contemporary Detroit, where an otherwise likeable but unremarkable former Franciscan brother proves to have the ability to heal the grievously ill or traumatized, at which times he begins pouring blood from the five wounds of Christ that appear in his body.

Leonard's style here is his usual matter-of-fact narrative; the girl record-promoter does this, the former radio-preacher does that, the TV talk-show host does the other, the religious fanatic does his thing, and the mother of the boy healed of leukemia is a topless go-go dancer. Although the stigmatist calls himself "Juvenal," the name given him before he quit the Franciscans because although he could heal he wasn't at all sure he believed enough to become a priest, he's really Charlie Lawson, and he's very good in bed as long as he's with his true love.

Leonard fails technically — as he will sometimes do, although with most of his books he's masterful — to an extent far greater than Attanasio. Having done a very nice job of debunking most common ideas of what a stigmatist must necessarily believe and behave like, he drifts into slapstick, and thus, then into a blah ending because we no longer know how to take the book. Furthermore, much of the same ground has already been covered for the SF audience by Theodore Sturgeon's last novel, *Godbody*, and for the general audience by A. J. Langguth's neglected collection, *Jesus Christs*.

But it *is* interesting that Leonard would have tackled this theme at all, and obviously done a lot of good intellectual dissection on it, just as it's interesting that neither

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his publisher nor Attanasio's are willing to concede the faintest shred of fantasy in the work, whereas these works plainly do belong in the literature.

How so? Out with it, Budrys:

I think because they embody the agreement that we *know* the world is not as we say it is. This is not something we dare to declare, perhaps because we *know* the things that are really going on don't want us to. Step on a crack, break your mother's back. "Classical fantasy" is a way of tickling at that construct. This kind of fantasy is ringing its doorbell on Hallowe'en and running like hell.

Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

HOW MANY of your friends or family members know you well enough to choose a vacation for you?

"Merry Christmas, and here's some tickets for a Bahamas cruise."

"Thank you very much, but I burn easily and I get seasick and I'd go crazy cooped up on a little boat and besides, I love the snow in winter."

"Well, excuse *me* for trying to please you."

Now imagine if they not only gave you the tickets, but also chose the entire itinerary, complete with every person you'd meet, every sight you'd see, every adventure you'd have, even the thoughts you'd think. Maybe, just maybe, they would have chosen the perfect vacation for you. Probably not.

Yet isn't that what we do when we give someone a novel?

Giving science fiction or fantasy as a gift is even trickier when you're dealing with young people. You can make even more mistakes — like giving them a book that's too young or too old. Yet it's still worth a try. For one thing, it's a cheaper experiment than giving

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someone a cruise. For another, the worlds you open up for a kid can change his or her life in a way that no vacation in the real world ever could.

You already have your private list of favorite adult books, if you're buying gifts for a kid who's reading at that level. But you may not be familiar with some of the latest young-adult fantasy and science fiction. So here are some quick reviews that might help you.

First, though, let me remind you of a name that I've mentioned several times this year: William Sleator. I won't review his books again. I'll just assure you that *any* of his novels will be a fine introduction to science fiction for kids in those years of discovery — bright 9-year-olds and imaginative 14-year-olds alike.

Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars, Daniel M. Pinkwater (Dutton, cloth, 248 pp, $14.95)

This book was thrust on me in the dealers room of the World Fantasy Convention in Nashville. All I said was, "I try to keep up with young adult science fiction," and suddenly five or six people were saying, "Have you read *Alan Mendelsohn!*" I hadn't then; now I have.

Standard young adult opening: The narrator, Leonard Neeble, is a nerd who just moved into a new high school where he suffers as class goat. Then he meets Alan Mendelsohn, also a new kid — but Mendelsohn doesn't take all the crap lying down.

What makes this book stand head and shoulders above all the *other* books that begin like that is the fact that Daniel Pinkwater (the same one who does commentaries for NPR) has the most beatifically perverse worldview I've ever seen. He writes like a demented cherub who thinks he's the angel of death, slicing up all his characters even as he makes you love them.

And the deeper you get into the book, the more rules change, until you're living in a full-blown absurdist fantasy universe — the kind of bright absurdism where you know the world is ruled by petty fascists but you can't stop laughing. Find a copy for the kid you love best. Then wrap it fast, *don't* read it yourself, or it will end up on your shelves and the kid will get some safe, tame, domesticated book instead.

Alien Child, Pamela Sargent (Harper & Row, cloth, 246 pp, $13.95)

I'm a stodgy, morally-conservative parent who doesn't approve of young adult fiction where kids discover it's O.K. to get laid as long as

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you're really in love and use a condom. Nor do I think fiction is the place to teach the facts of life. So believe me when I tell you that Pamela Sargent's garden-of-eden novel *Alien Child* deals intelligently with sex, and does it with such taste and restraint that I have few qualms about giving it to a ten-year-old. But you might have more qualms than I, so be warned.

Nita is a human child being raised by aliens. She sees no other humans except the computer personalities that answer every question except the ones that matter most. Then one day she sees another human child, and learns that he has been living all these years in the same place. Why didn't her alien "parents" tell her? How did she come to life? Are there other human survivors somewhere on earth?

Finding the answers to these questions makes *Alien Child* a fascinating mystery and adventure story, but the heart of the book is the exploration of what it means to be human. For Nita has always experienced herself through the eyes of a kind but irretrievably alien mind, and discovering Sven means rediscovering herself, and together reinventing the human race.

Sargent's most recent adult novel, *The Shore of Women*, was that rare creature, a perfect book. Sargent does not lower her standards when she writes young adult fiction. Like the best of young adult writers, her artistic standards remain as high as ever, while her standards of clarity and concision actually rise. Sometimes I wished she could afford to linger more; at the end I wished the story had been longer. But the intelligence and resourcefulness she showed in *Shore of Women* are undiminished in *Alien Child*.

The Changes: vol 1, *The Devil's Children;* vol 2, *Heartsease;* vol 3, *The Weathermonger*, Peter Dickinson (Dell, Laurel-Leaf Fantasy, paper 1988 reprint of work dating from the 1960s and 1970s, paper 187pp, 236pp, 190pp, $2.95 ea.)

I picked up these books because of the gorgeous Dillon cover art and because I thought Peter Dickinson's story "Flight" was not only the best thing in Robin McKinley's anthology *Imaginary Lands* (Ace, 1985), but one of the most intellectually powerful stories I'd ever read.

A sudden and terrible change has come over contemporary Britain, thrusting the people back into the dark ages. All their machines still work — but now, at the sound of an engine running or the sight of a vehicle moving, people are overcome by terror and rage. Anyone caught using a machine is killed.

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Yet many British refugees discover that if they can only cross the channel, their loathing of machinery disappears, and they can live normal lives again, And nonnatives of Britain are unaffected by the madness that has overcome the others.

The Devils' Children tells of a girl who gets involved with a group of Sikhs, who run a grave risk of being slaughtered because of the inadvertant use of a machine; they use her spells of madness as a bellwether, to warn them when some perfectly normal action puts them in danger.

Heartsease is the story of two kids whose humanity overcomes their loathing of machines. Finding that a "witch" — a spy from more normal lands — is not dead after all, they save his life and risk everything trying to get him to safety.

In *The Weathermonger*, an expedition is mounted to find the source of the madness and extinguish it.

The stories are compelling adventure. They are also a truthful examination of how both good and evil communities are created out of chaos. Dickinson writes so well, and his milieu is so real, that at times I found these books unbearably dark; I had to set them aside awhile before I could go on.

But this will not be a drawback for most "young adults." Tragedy and bleakness are the stuff of romantic adolescence, and these stories are so rich with it that I believe they have the power to transform — to be the kind of seminal tale that turns a bright child into a reader forever.

Up from Jericho Tel, E.L. Konigsburg (Dell/Yearling, trade paper, 178pp, $2.95)

E.L. Konigsburg is one of the great writers of modern young adult fiction, and while many of her stories tease us by showing us the dark, mysterious borderlands of fantasy, *Up from Jericho Tel* is the first time she has plunged right into the supernatural.

The only trouble is that when the two kids in this book find themselves meeting with a supernatural visitor from the grave, it turns out to be Tallulah Bankhead. I'm not exactly a teenager anymore, and I worked many years in theatre, where legends of the marvelous Tallulah abound — yet even *I* felt that Konigsburg was invoking her character in a way that suggested that she assumed that her audience already knew Tallulah Bankhead's mannerisms and eccentricities and blinding talent, and loved them. Is there any teenager in America who has ever heard of this actress?

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Never mind. By the end of this book they *will* have heard of her, and perhaps that's part of Konigsburg's agenda in writing it. Stage actors live on only in legend — their work is unrecorded in print or film (T.B. gave a fine performance in *Lifeboat,* but I don't think she made any other movies). So *Jericho Tel* may give her legend another generation or two of life.

Much more important is the tale itself. T.B. sends the kids on mad quests, eventually leading them to solve the mystery of what happened to the Regina Stone, which Tallulah always had with her, but which disappeared after she died. They solve the mystery — and resolve a few things about themselves along the way. A fun book — and a book that bridges the genre boundaries between contemporary YA fiction and YA sf and fantasy.

Charon's Ark, Rick Gauger (Ballantine/Del Rey, paper, 375pp, $3.50)

There's nothing on this book to suggest that it's a "young adult" novel — so it makes the perfect gift for a teenager who wouldn't be caught dead reading a "children's book," yet who will appreciate a story in which high school adolescents are thrust into real-world life-and-death situations.

The beginning is so high-concept I can already hear the cameras rolling: Some kids from an obscure American high school are selected to visit an equally obscure island nation in the Pacific. On the way, their airliner is seized by a UFO — the wings are sheared off and the plane is drawn up into the belly of the alien craft.

From there, though, Gauger really gets creative. The aliens aren't really all-powerful. Their spaceship is on its last legs, and if the kids don't behave — and, in true Rambo fashion, they *don't* — they run a real risk of trashing the whole ship. They end up on an artificial moon of Pluto, where they are faced with a murderous alien culture in the last throes of decline — and a computer personality that makes Stalin look benign.

As you might expect, the class geek saves the day — but not at all in the *way* you expect, so that Gauger at once fulfills cliches and subverts them. The story dances between the funny and the tragic, but the result is an astonishingly good first novel. Like the best of the Heinlein young-adult novels, this story doesn't just reflect the lives of adolescents, it shows them how to rise out of that madness and make a place for themselves in the world of adults. Watch for Gauger's name on future books. This is a storyteller who *delivers.*

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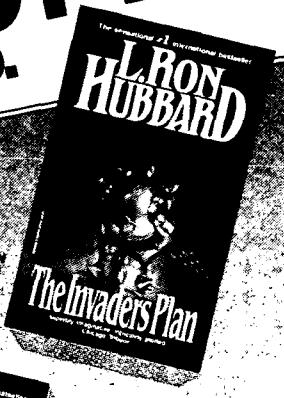
ONCE IT'S GOT YOU
IT WON'T LET YOU GO.



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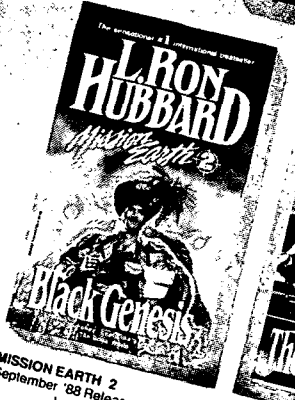

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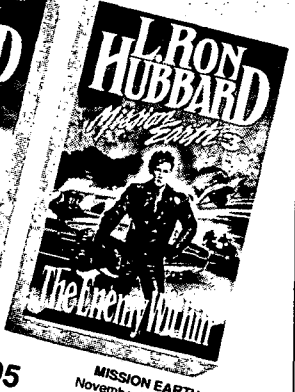

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Larry Tritten can be serious, as we'll illustrate with an upcoming story, but he is basically a humor writer, who was responsible for "The SF Book of Lists" (April 1985) and here offers . . .

A Science Fiction Readers' and Writers' Guide to the Universe

By Larry Tritten

SCIENCE FICTION, LIKE EVERY literary genre, has its archetypal characters and familiar themes. Knowing what they are will make you a better science fiction reader and writer. The following guide was designed to help you identify many of them.

HOW TO BE AN INTERSTELLAR EXPLORER

Don't drink the water in any extraterrestrial culture where the faucets emit a yellow vapor and the drinking glass is shaped like an oblique circular cylinder, glows in the dark, and is made of structural iron. When using alien rest rooms, watch out for toilets that look like miniature mining sluices and are operated by a system of levers and pulleys. Don't

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fall in love with any alien whose mating habits belong in an entomology text. Don't order a Big Meq at MeqZkkh's on Betelgeuse IV, and if you do, skip the tantalum sauce. If you're going to spend most of the trip in a state of sleep and plan on passing very close to any black holes, don't leave the night-light on. Never give artificial respiration to any being whose body chemistry is a composite of carbon, methane, formaldehyde, and phosgene. If you're on a ship that travels faster than light, throw your light bulbs out and paint the bulkheads with luminous paint. Don't spend the night on any planet where the representatives of the dominant species write graffiti on the hull of your spaceship with spray-paint cans shortly after introducing themselves. Don't chew tobacco on a low-gravity planet. If the ship's computer beats you at chess more than five times in a row, tell it nonchalantly that it's too bad it will never know how enjoyable food and sex are. Resist the temptation to make puns using the names Sirius and Uranus. If you're drinking with an extraterrestrial who asks you who Richard Nixon was, the man whose name the U.S.A. put on a plaque on your moon, change the subject. Don't put too much stock in any advice given by a being from a world whose science had named the planets in its solar system after stand-up comedians. Never visit any brothel beyond Antares without wearing a condom made of asbestos, silicone, and vulcanite. If you want to have a pet aboard your spaceship, make it a cat and not a dog — unless you don't mind going through the airlock twice a day to walk it. If you aren't certain whether or not space is curved, don't set out on an exploratory voyage without a lifetime's supply of toilet paper.

HOW TO BE A TIME TRAVELER

Skip the Dark Ages (especially the plague years) and any future dominated by a government that prohibits dancing, magazine centerfolds, and the use of confetti. If you do plan to travel during the plague years, don't wear a Mickey Mouse T-shirt. Don't plan your itinerary with the help of any travel agency whose window display features depictions of Depression soup lines, public executions, or natural disasters. Don't tell shaggy-dog stories during the Age of Reason. Don't show Shakespeare a book of poems by Gertrude Stein. Or play a Kiss tape for Beethoven. Or give Rembrandt a Polaroid camera. Don't use a skateboard on the Appian Way. Leave your credit cards at home. Don't get a New Wave haircut before

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visiting the Reformation. Don't bother looking for a place to park in the twenty-first century. If you're an existentialist, go back in time and sell your grandfather contraceptives. If you're using your time machine just to pick up the week's grocery shopping in 1939, make sure the five-dollar bill you use has an appropriate mint date. Never book passage on a huge luxury time-liner whose itinerary will take it through the Ice Age. Don't do sleight-of-hand tricks in seventeenth-century Salem. Never get into a time machine that has more dents than a demolition-derby automobile. When you get back, have the tact not to seek out history professors and irritate them by telling them that H. L. Mencken's definition of a historian as an unsuccessful novelist is true. Don't worry about returning overdue books to the library in Alexandria. Try to avoid reading the ingredients labels of any canned or packaged food you eat past the turn of the twentieth century. Don't leave soft-drink cans in the Precambrian era. If you're well traveled, cancel your subscription to *Time* because you consider it temporally parochial. Wonder why Time is a father and Nature is a mother and what kind of settlement she might get if they're ever divorced.

HOW TO BE A MUTANT

Either (a) have a cranium the size of a basketball and be able to explain Heisenberg's uncertainty principle in Urdu and develop a new theory of ontology during your lunch hour, or (b) look like an anthropomorphic cauliflower and leave a trail of viscid secretions in your wake wherever you walk. If (a), have parents who send you to Reed College or MIT when you're twelve years old; and if (b), have parents who keep you chained to the furnace in the basement and feed you the dog's leftovers. In either case, don't expect to have a date for the Sadie Hawkins dance. Have a seventh sense, and an eighth. Be able to rearrange the furniture by telekinesis. Enjoy X rays as much as most people enjoy a massage. If (a), get a job with the government and supervise a project aimed at converting the jungles of Venus into huge Caesar salads for the first Earth colonists; and if (b), get a job as custodian at the city dump and live in a corrugated tin shack decorated with pictures from *Architectural Digest* and *Playboy* centerfolds. If (a), spend your free time developing your psychic powers so you can hypnotize beautiful women into coming up to your apartment to see your topological etchings; and if (b), be more sensitive and romantic than

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most people but get fewer valentines than Charlie Brown. If (a), get your own show on public television popularizing quantum mechanics; and if (b), become an antivivisection crusader. If (a), go steady with one of the highest-scoring female members in the history of MENSA and ask her if she'd like to get into your genes; and if (b), read the classified personals in *Fetish Times* looking for your soul mate. If (a), have a pet dolphin who is helping you work out a concept of piscine syntax; and if (b), own hamsters and enjoy trying to teach them to go down a banister.

HOW TO BE A ROBOT ANDROID

Add riders to the 1st and 2nd of Asimov's Laws of Robotics, i.e., 1. A robot may punch the face of a human being who by a general consensus of human and robot opinion is a jerk; 2. A robot may ignore orders given to it by any human being who wears a baseball cap backward or leaves a tip in the cafeteria. If your owner tells you to shine all of his shoes on Saturday night when you had intended on going to an NAAC3PO meeting, do it but hide his best pair of Clarks in the basement. If you're nonanthropomorphic, try to make up for it by having a great personality and a terrific sense of humor. If you're a good-looking female android and your inventor falls in love with you, marries you, and then dies, be heartbroken but get over it, start hanging out in jet-set circles, get married again to someone in the Social Register; and if you get divorced, make sure you stick him for plenty of alimony. If the government wants you to fight its wars, move to Switzerland. Look forward to the day when a robot will be commemorated on a postage stamp or the FBI's most-wanted list. Either object to robot jokes (e.g., How many robots does it take to screw in a light bulb? Two. One to hold the bulb and one to do research to figure out if the bulb is animal, vegetable, or mineral.) or retaliate with human jokes (e.g., How many human beings does it take to screw in a light bulb? Five hundred and eighty-six. One to hold the bulb and 585 to run the power company.). Think of the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz* as an example of anthropocentrism. If you're being brought to trial for murdering a human, don't get a lawyer who wears a Confederate-flag lapel pin. If you're a menial, aspire to be a maître d' at Antoine's or Le Pantophage; and if you work for the government, try to get a job that will elevate you to the status of a Henry Kissinger and give you the right to address the president affectionately as

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Twonky. If you're a household robot and are asked to read the children a bedtime story, read them *Pinocchio*. If you're a sexed robot, and lonely, try running a classified personals ad in *Popular Mechanics*.

HOW TO BE A TELEPATH

Don't spend much time with your creditors or in-laws. Never buy a house next door to a mental institution. Think of parapsychologists as psychic social climbers. Take a phrenologist to lunch. Try to relax people in your presence by demonstrating that you have a good sense of humor: tell them that Edgar Cayce wasn't really a medium, but an extra large, or that you know a subliterate mind reader who moves his lips when he reads minds. If you have precognitive powers, try not to think about planned obsolence when buying a BMW or what the new television season will bring. Think of computers as dilettantes and philistines, and tell one you understand that IBM stands for I'm a Birdbrained Machine. If you're a psychosexual libertine, enjoy extrasensory perversions and go to mind-swapping parties; also, if you go home with someone who doesn't know you well, ask them if they're broad-minded enough to let you produce teleplasm. Test your versatility by reading minds of triplets at a smorgasboard, and of a linguist who has taken a psychedelic drug. Think about Rodin's *The Thinker* the way the average person thinks about Stonehenge. Move to Hollywood; hang out around the studios, at Spago, and on Sunset Boulevard; and then get a job for six figures as a gossip columnist for the *Los Angeles Times* whose column makes Liz Smith seem secretive. Never go fishing for compliments in a narcissist's stream of consciousness. Never drink before projecting yourself through the space-time continuum. Be the subject of a scientific experiment by the government, and be uncooperative and ominous unless they give you tax-exempt status. After finishing dinner in a Chinese restaurant, tell the waiter to skip the fortune cookies. Joke about a not-so-bright telepathic friend who is taking a course in remedial hindsight at Rhine University.

HOW TO BE THE LAST MAN IN THE WORLD

Play a lot of solitaire. Don't bother picking up the dry cleaning. Forget your Social Security number. Think about the sexist nature of your situa-

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tion. Think about how all of the mail in the world addressed to RESIDENT is now yours. Read *The Three Faces of Eve* and *Sybil* and look for clues on how to develop a multiple personality. Or study ventriloquism. Snoop. For something to do, go to every store in town with an OPEN sign in the window and turn them all around. If you smoke, give yourself a seat in the NO SMOKING section of a restaurant. Coin a word to describe your new form of government — monocracy. If you enjoy reading, don't break your glasses. Sell yourself a six-bedroom estate in Beverly Hills for $16.22. Stop worrying about social diseases. Envy Robinson Crusoe. Have yourself a birthday party attended by forty or fifty of the most attractive female mannequins from the trendiest women's stores in town. Think of *Waiting for Godot* as an upbeat play. At night amuse yourself by making silhouettes of animals on the wall. Sleep through New Year's Eve. Make an objective attempt to understand the appeal of misanthropy and misogyny. Pick out a brand-new shotgun in a sporting-goods store and go hunting for happy-face stickers and HAVE A NICE DAY signs. If your name is Adam, mark an X beside every woman named Eve in the phone book, and methodically check out all of the addresses. Put thirty or forty Welcome mats around your front door . . . just in case.

HOW TO BE AN EXTRATERRESTRIAL INVADING/VISITING EARTH

If you're an invader, be a humanoid with a physique like an Olympic athlete's, a slightly vulpine leer, and wear a caped uniform with an emblem of a boot foot kicking a planet on it. Or look like a cross between an iguana and a Tasmanian devil and have the temperament of a Fundamentalist preacher. Or be an amorphous blob with extensible digits and a penchant for molesting beautiful human female physicists. Or look like a Jackson Pollock painting and eat light for breakfast. If you're visiting, be any of the above physical types, do your best to mix inconspicuously, always tip at least 15 percent, and don't take pictures of military installations. Don't ask a human why they put collars on their children and walk them on leashes. If you're a symbiote, stay away from self-actualization lectures. Don't mistake the float balloons at the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade for Earth's dominant species. If you weigh more than three hundred pounds and come from a world where the gravity is three times stronger than Earth's, stay off the dance floor in nightclubs. Don't cheer

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for Godzilla in a Times Square theater. Don't eat the plastic flowers in a vase on the table in a restaurant and then tell the waiter to give your compliments to the chef. Don't ask a cabdriver if he knows where you can buy an ounce of smaze. If you're an avian being from a planet where your government rations bugs, issues flying permits only to the elite, and requires everyone to be in a cage after ten o'clock, seek political asylum with the Audubon Society. Try a Milky Way and a Mars bar. Don't tell an Earth scientist that you equate astronomy with voyeurism, or that you consider proctology Earth's most advanced science. Wonder if *The Guinness Book of World Records* is a jokebook. Do a great impression of Carl Sagan on open-mike night at Catch a Rising Star in New York City. If breathing oxygen makes you uncomfortable, spend most of your time in Los Angeles. If you're a nontourist visitor, be an envoy here to offer Earth membership in a Galactic Federation — if people stop reading astrology magazines and the Screen Actor's Guild revokes William Shatner's SAG card.

"It's all in the mind."

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Ian McDowell was "born in Wisconsin, but raised a Tarheel," and his southern background is reflected in "On the Dark Road," his first story for F&SF, which he dedicates to the memory of his fellow North Carolinian, Manly Wade Wellman. It is a horrific reminder that perhaps we should believe all we hear . . .

On the Dark Road

By Ian McDowell

ELIAS WALKINGSTICK LEANED back in his creaking rocker and sucked on his corncob pipe, the sputtering firelight limning the canyons and gullies of his seventy-eight-year-old face. "Years and years and years ago," he began, "before the war and the war before that and the war before that, there was a Cherokee woman who lived alone with her baby up on Bear Ridge.

"Her people had come back from Oklahoma, back from the Trail of Tears, and out there they'd picked up the habit of carrying their children strapped to their backs, the way the Plains Indians do. One night her baby began to cry, and when she picked it up, it seemed warm with fever. But there was no water with which she could cool its brow, for the well had gone dry that very day, and there was nothing for it but to go down the valley to the nearest spring.

"Even sick, she did not want to leave the baby alone in the cabin at night, so she strapped it on her back and started down the trail. The

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spring she was heading for was in a sacred place, surrounded by tall pines in a valley where no other pine trees grew. But the woman had been long in Oklahoma, and had forgotten the old ways of the hills, and so she was not afraid to take her water there.

"Finally, she came to the spring, and there she filled her bucket, and when she stood up and made to go, she felt breathing on her neck, and knew something tall was standing right behind her. And a voice, which didn't sound like anything she'd ever heard, whispered in her ear, and this is what it said:

"'Woman, you take water from my sacred place. Now I will take something of your own.'

"A white woman would have screamed or fainted or even turned around, but she was Cherokee, for all her Oklahoma ways, and more sensible than that. Instead, she bolted like a deer, running up the trail as fast as her strong legs could carry her.

"And when she was safe in her cabin, with the door barred and the shutters latched, she unstrapped her baby and went to unwrap his blankets. And there was blood on the blankets, and she began to scream, for that was when she found that the baby's head had been bitten clean off."

Jesus Christ, thought Steve, stopping the tape and shifting uncomfortably on the hardwood floor. Beside him, Monica sat perfectly still, her elbows on her kneecaps and her eyes half-closed, the firelight shimmering off her straight black hair. "God," he whispered to her, "this is such cheerful stuff you're collecting."

As usual, she ignored him. "Bitten off? By what?"

Mr. Walkingstick smiled, exposing surprisingly good dentures. "Who can say?" He took another puff on his pipe. "Nowadays they call the whole valley where that spring was Callie Hollow, and make like it's named after some old white woman named Callie who used to live there. Actually, Callie just comes from the old Cherokee word *Tsulkala*. Maybe that's what done it, the *Tsulkala*."

Steve leaned back against the warm stones of the hearth wall, surreptitiously running his index finger down the inside of Monica's jeans-covered thigh. Shifting her weight, she moved away from his hand. Irritated, he looked at Mr. Walkingstick and tried to smile. "Socallie? What's that?"

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"Suhl-ca-la," corrected Monica before the old man could answer. "It's some kind of local woods spirit or demon. A shapeshifter."

He'd heard that term in the movie on HBO the other night — either *Wolfen* or *The Howling* — he was always getting those two mixed up. "You mean, like a werewolf?"

"No," said Monica with pedantic patience. "More like the Algonquian manitou. It can take on the form and personality of anything it wants to — the deer you've spent half a day tracking up a mountain, the black horse you find in your stable at night, the strange woman you meet on the road. Even people you know."

Mr. Walkingstick nodded. "In some stories, it can look like them and talk like them and tell you things only they could tell you."

"Oh, like a Cherokee version of *The Thing*."

Monica looked pained, as she always did when he mentioned the things he knew about. His enthusiasm for popular culture clearly embarrassed her. Sometimes he thought *he* embarrassed her. One day he meant to have a talk with her about that. After all, it was not his hobby; it was his field, for Christ's sakes, a field just as valid as her's. He never made fun of her for studying old folklore.

Mr. Walkingstick interrupted his brooding. "If you're interested in the *Tsulkala*, I know another story about the critter."

Monica smiled that peculiar smile that changed her face from horsey to striking. "Yes, please. Turn the tape back on, Steve."

"It's getting late. Your parents will worry."

"Let them. My dissertation is worth it."

Knowing better than to argue, he put a new cassette in the machine.

"Not long after the war they fought to free the slaves," began Mr. Walkingstick, shifting back into his formal, storytelling mode, "there was a white family that lived down on the creek that runs through what they now call Callie Hollow. One evening, when the cicadas were first singing and the air was starting to get cool, they were just sitting down to supper, when there was a knock at the door, and in walked the local circuit preacher, all tall and thin and wearing his black suit and big black hat. They weren't glad to see him, not being terribly godly folk, but they made him a place anyway, and he took a seat, all without a word or a nod or even a tilt of his head.

"And there he sat, not taking off his hat, or speaking, or eating the food

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they pushed in front of him. Figuring he was touched, they went about wolfing down their stew, and were just pushing their plates away, when the door busted open and a cousin came running in.

"It seems some neighbor had found the Reverend's trap wagon up on the ridge, with his black suit on the seat all in tatters, and pieces of the Reverend in the tatters. So who was sitting in front of them, looking like the Reverend and dressed like him, and wearing his hat at table?

"Right then the stranger cleared his throat, and looking at him, everybody found they couldn't move, that they were as fast in their seats as if they'd been nailed there, as stiff as the sparrow when the blacksnake looks him in the eye. And the stranger stood up, stood up taller in the firelight than the Reverend could ever stand, so tall his big hat brushed the roof beams, and his eyes were glowing like the eyes of a bobcat in a birch tree when you shine your lantern at the branches. And this is what he said:

"'Here you all are, with your bellies fat and full of food and my belly empty, and what shall I have for my supper?'

"Couple of days later a traveling man found the door open and no family in the cabin, just bits of cloth and chewed bone all over the floor, and under the table, all their shoes, with all their feet still in them."

Mr. Walkingstick leaned back and shut his eyes like a musician waiting for applause. "Y'know, Monica," said Steve, not bothering so much to whisper this time, "I think I prefer the stories you used to get, the ones about buried treasure, and skeletons in the graveyard, and black horses with red eyes at the crossroads at night, and ghost trains, and the devil showing up at poker games. All those stories are Disney material compared to this."

She actually moved closer to him and gave his thigh a squeeze, reassuring him for once. "Don't be a wussie," she said, but the gesture cut the harshness out of the words.

Getting up, she stretched her lanky frame before the fire. "Thank you very much, Mr. Walkingstick, for the stories. It's material I don't think anyone has collected before."

The old man rose somewhat unsteadily out of his wicker-backed chair. "Well, I thank you and your friend for the visit, missy — I don't see many people anymore. Do they really study old tales and such down at the university?"

Monica shook his hand. "Oh yes, they study all kinds of things these

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days. They're even letting Steve write his thesis on old comic books and movies."

Steve winced, although he should have gotten used to her gibes by now. "Not just comic books and movies. It's an overview of popular culture."

The old man nodded as if he actually understood what Steve was talking about. "You want to hear some more stories, you come on back up here anytime." He took Steve's hand. His grip was dry and firm and surprisingly strong, and for a moment, Steve thought there was going to be a contest to see who would stop squeezing first. "Sure you young people won't stay for supper? I'd be glad to have ye."

Monica looked at Steve as if she found the idea attractive. You never knew what might appeal to her. "Well. . . ."

"I shot a possum last Monday. Still got most of him in the icebox. It's real tasty with collard greens and sweet taters."

Monica didn't need Steve's imploring glance. "No thanks. We couldn't impose."

"We're on a diet," Steve added weakly.

Mr. Walkingstick nodded. "You diet, boy?"

"Yes, sir."

"What color?"

The old man cackled like a chicken. "That's a joke, son." Steve made himself smile. The calculated folksiness was beginning to grate.

Mr. Walkingstick followed them to the door. "You take good care of this young lady, son."

Somewhat reluctantly, Steve shook his hand again. "Don't worry. I intend to."

Monica laughed. "Actually, I usually have to take care of him."

Mr. Walkingstick shook his head and looked suddenly solemn, like a contemplative turtle. "That's just because he's a stranger here. You go back north with him, to the big cities, and he'll do the looking after you."

Steve smiled. "I don't know about that, but thank you. Right now I've got to get her back to her parent's house before they have a heart attack." Taking Monica's arm, he stepped through the doorway and out onto the gravel path. Mr. Walkingstick shut the door behind them.

Outside, the air was surprisingly cold. The car was a dark shape on the pale river of the dirt road, with the elms and birches a darker mass be-

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hind. Something moved on the gravel, causing Steve to recoil. "Jesus, a snake!"

Monica calmly took a penlight flashlight out of her purse. "Where?"

He pointed. The light picked up a thick shape with a blunt head and raised snout coiling on the flinty pebbles. Monica walked to it.

"Careful," he warned, "it might be poisonous."

She knelt and poked at it. "It's a hognose, out looking for toads. They're not poisonous; in fact, they never even bite. Watch." She poked it again, and it rolled limply on its side. She picked it up.

"Instead, they play dead. See? It's like the poor thing's fainted.'

She advanced with it, and he took a step backward, almost off the path. "Put it down, or I'll faint, too."

She laughed, but not meanly, and put the snake down. "Steve, you are such a wimp," she said, walking toward him.

They embraced. "I love it when you call me names," he said, just glad that she was touching him. Their kiss was interrupted by a gastric rumble.

She pulled away. "What the hell was that?"

"My stomach, mad that I skipped lunch."

She pulled him close and bent her head to kiss him. "Poor baby. We'll just have to get you something to eat on the way back."

"Do we have time? Your parents. . . ."

"Can worry all they want. You need to be fed." She kissed him again, and he was happy.

THE NEON sign atop the diner advertised PIZZA MOUNTAIN TROUT. Steve wondered if it was a single dish — fried fish on pizza crust with tomato paste and mozzarella cheese, maybe with black olives in the eye sockets. He hated the way all the little restaurants on the parkway served rainbow trout with the head still on and the eyes looking at you. Inside, he ordered a burger.

There was a glass case full of imitation Cherokee artifacts beside the cash register, while the walls were decorated with folksy sayings like, "Chief Redman says: Don't speak evil of your neighbor until you've walked a mile in his moccasins." The red Formica table had several old mustard stains on it.

"Mr. Walkingstick is a very accomplished storyteller," said Monica,

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sipping her Diet Pepsi. "Maybe too accomplished."

"What do you mean?" He absentmindedly squeezed the bottle of catsup, which was shaped like a squaw in a blanket, a Cherokee Mrs. Butterworth. A bubble of the thin red liquid appeared atop the figure's head, making her look as if she'd been scalped.

"His stories are too polished, almost literary. That means they may not be authentic folktales."

"Really?"

She nodded. "I remember once when I was Dr. Corum's graduate assistant. He was doing a book on Appalachian 'jump tales,' and I was helping him record them. There was one old preacher up near Boone who told this great story about a mean old man who was looking for a buried treasure that was supposed to be sunk at the bottom of this abandoned well. The only trouble was, the well had some kind of demon guarding it."

She lit a cigarette, which annoyed him, as she'd once again promised to quit. "O.K., at the climax of the story, the old man was out by the well at midnight, pulling on this wet, slimy rope that went down into the water, and feeling something heavy on the other end. Just then the moon went behind some clouds, and he couldn't see anything, but he kept on pulling. Whatever it was at the end of the rope got stuck under the lip of the well, so he reached down and got his hands under what felt like a big, wet canvas bag, full of mud and maybe something else. He'd just got it up to the level of his face, when the thing that felt like a bag reached out and put its arms around his neck."

She looked at him and grinned, waiting for a reaction. He smiled. "It was the demon, and it killed him."

"Right. It was also the climax to some old ghost story by someone named James — not Henry, someone else. The preacher told the same story. In fact, the ending was almost word for word. It turned out they had several collections of classic ghost stories in the Sunday-school library."

The waitress brought his hamburger and fries. Despite the bright orange dye in her hair, she looked almost seventy years old. "You want anything else, honey?" she asked Monica.

"Just some water." While she was getting it, Steve took a bite of the hamburger. It tasted like a charred hockey puck. He decided he might have been better off with Mr. Walkingstick's leftover possum. Monica began to steal his fries, but he didn't say anything, even though they

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were the most edible thing on the plate.

The waitress came back with the water. "Sure you don't want anything, honey? We got some nice pie in the icebox. Some cobbler, too."

Monica shook her head. "No, thanks, I'm on a diet." He wondered how she could say that with a straight face between mouthfuls of his fries. "Besides, we have to eat and run — we're due back in Boone by 9:30, and it looks like we're going to be late." Fine thing for her to be worrying about that now, he thought.

"You can make it," said the waitress, "if you take the shortcut."

"Shortcut?" asked Monica. "I didn't know there was one."

"Sure. This highway out here loops around the valley, but old Callie Road cuts right through it. Once you get down the mountain, there aren't any lights, of course, but turn on your high beams, and you'll be O.K."

"Old Callie Road?"

The waitress nodded. "Take the ramp right here beside the diner —that turnoff between us and the Shell station. Look out for potholes, though. It'll take you straight across the valley, then ends in a dirt road that goes up the far ridge. It was supposed to cut across the edge of the reservation, too, but there was a big set-to between the county and the tribal council and the federal people, and it never got any further. It was one of those CCC roads Roosevelt's people were building back in the Depression." For a moment she looked embarrassed. "'Course, that was all before my time, so I don't know much about it."

Monica nodded gravely. "Maybe I will have some of that pie, after all," she said, taking Steve's last french fry.

Outside, bats were swooping through the parking lot lights, and the cicadas were singing in the trees. Sure enough, there was a road winding down the mountain to the pooled darkness of the valley. Beside it was a railing with several telescopes, a picnic table, and a lighted sign showing a bonneted old lady pointing and the words CALLIE SAYS: WHOA BUD, THIS VIEW'S TOO GOOD TO MISS.

"Why is the sign lighted?" asked Steve. "You can't see anything at night."

Instead of answering, Monica walked to the railing and stared down at the disappearing line of lights. "Callie Hollow, like in Mr. Walkingstick's story."

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Steven nodded. "Right. It's probably full of spirits and demons."

"It could be." She sounded like she took the idea seriously.

"Are you afraid?"

She sat on the railing, already seeming to have forgotten about the need to be back in Boone. Steve wondered what she would do if she didn't have him to herd her around and see she got places on time. "No, I'm not afraid," she answered, still sounding as if she thought his question had been a serious one. "Are you?"

"I'm a city boy, remember?"

"Some of the most superstitious people I've met have been city boys."

"Well, I'm not one of them." An idea struck him; she was always accusing him of being too timid and earnest. "But I know how to deal with spirits and demons."

He jumped up on the picnic table and began to intone, trying to sound like an actor in one of the outdoor dramas so popular here in North Carolina. "Spirits of the mountain, hear me!"

"Steve, don't," she said softly.

He ignored her, determined to carry this through without her making him feel embarrassed. "Hear me, O spirits of wood and stream. Hear me, and give us safe passage through your lands. Leave us unharmed, that we may buy rubber tomahawks and rock candy at the tourist shops of your people, that we may purchase their leather goods at outrageous prices, and get our pictures taken with the chiefs in the fiberglass tepees on Main Street, and pay homage to the live bears at every service station."

The echo faded, and with it his sudden burst of high spirits. He looked down, feeling stupid again, hoping for a smile but not really expecting one. But Monica wasn't looking at him at all. Her face wore an expression of intense listening.

"What is it?"

"All the cicadas and crickets and the rest — they just stopped."

He listened. The insect chorus was as loud as ever. "No, they haven't."

She shook her head. "No, just for a minute, while you were chanting that stuff. It was like there was a break in the rhythm, or it was all on a big record that skipped a groove."

"I didn't notice." He jumped down and put his arm around her. At least she wasn't mad at him for acting like a clown. "C'mon, we do need to

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get going." She gave him one brief kiss before she slipped back behind the wheel.

NOT LONG after they passed the last light pole, the road leveled out, and they were driving a fairly straight two-lane strip of asphalt that ran between dark fields and darker stands of trees. Once, their headlights picked up what Steve at first thought was a pair of Great Danes playing beside the road. As they bounded away, he saw they were baby deer.

Monica drove silently, steering past potholes. He envied her skill with the stick shift, and her ability to navigate treacherous mountain turns. Still, Mr. Walkingstick had a point; get her in a New York traffic jam, and she might not be so hot.

He fiddled with the radio dial, catching a few words amid the buzzing. ". . . sinners . . . not saved . . . holy retribution. . . ." Several times he heard the words AIDS spoken with a particular vehemence.

"Turn it off," said Monica in a tired voice. "All you ever get up here is static and preachers."

She sounded beat. The road was fairly straight, and the moon was out, making the landscape ghostly but quite visible. Even he shouldn't have any trouble driving here, he thought. He was about to ask her to pull over and let him take the wheel, when they hit the pothole. The car lurched, scraping something on the asphalt, and bounced out of the hole. Then a tire blew. They went over the embankment and into the ditch.

Monica turned off the engine. He could hear the night noises, the ever-present cicadas and the rest of the choir, even with the windows rolled up. They sat still, held fast by the seat belts that had kept them from being thrown into the dashboard or against the doors, both of them staring straight ahead. "Shit," said Monica after what seemed like a long time.

Steve got out. The car was completely in the ditch, having slid sideways down the grassy bank. It had come to rest on almost-level gravel and was pointed parallel to the road. He heard Monica's door open. "Help me with the spare," she said tonelessly.

He immediately felt irritated, like she was trying to prove something. "You can't change the tire here," he said, trying to keep his annoyance out of his voice.

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She opened the hatchback and tossed out the jack. "Why not? The car's pretty level, and the ground's firm enough."

"Maybe. But we can't drive in the ditch, and we won't get out of it without a tow truck."

"We'll see." She got the tire out without waiting for him to help her.

He gave in. "At least let me do that. That way I'll be the one the car falls on."

She went on jacking up the front end. "I've changed more tires than you have, city boy. Get the dry-cell flashlight from the back, and set it on the ground beside me."

He did, angling the bulb so it pointed at the wheel. "You always make me feel like Steve Trevor."

"Who?"

"Wonder Woman's boyfriend — the one who always stood around and looked pretty while she bashed Nazis. Or maybe what's his name, the guy who was always in the background holding Sheena of the Jungle's spear while she wrestled with the lion. What *was* his name?"

She grunted. "How should I know? You're the student of popular culture." Standing up, she removed the flat and sent it rolling down the ditch. "And you think my degree is a worthless one."

He'd never said that, of course, but he didn't want to argue now, not when she was in the middle of her competent-woman act. The car seemed to teeter precariously on the jack. He was debating the merits of saying anything, when she walked toward him.

"Look, I'm sorry if I'm making you feel like a useless male sidekick. Why don't you walk down the road past those trees and see if you see any houses?" She pointed to where the road went into a bend that snaked through a stand of pines, obscuring what lay beyond.

"It's not safe to leave you here."

"You won't be out of earshot. Now go on, while I put on the spare tire. Here, take my penlight." She pressed it into his hand. "And look out for snakes." She kissed him on the cheek.

Feeling like a child sent off to do something useful, he clambered up out of the ditch and started down the road, keeping to the shoulder even though no oncoming car could be within a mile without him hearing it. Behind him the light of the big dry-cell flash dwindled. His loafers crunched on the gravel.

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Something twisted sinously on the asphalt, its coils black in the moonlight. Wanting to run, he turned the beam on it. It was thin for its length, and did not have the triangular head Monica had once told him to look out for. "It's harmless," he told himself, several times.

He was under the pines now; their smell was very strong. The dark branches creaked, he heard a soft "who?", and then a huge winged shape drifted silently through a patch of moonlight. It was the first time he'd ever seen a wild owl. He kicked a pinecone into the ditch and tried to whistle, but the notes were wrong, and sounded strained and hollow and distant. A cool wind pressed the fabric of his shirt into the small of his back and caused the needles overhead to rustle. Somewhere nearby, frogs were singing, and he heard water bubbling over stones.

The pine canopy was a claustrophobic ceiling, and he was glad when he was out of it. Pausing for a moment, he looked up, at the dark palisades of the surrounding mountains and the necklace of light that was the parkway, then higher, at the stars. Up on the main roads, they'd been blotted out by salt and neon, almost as much as they were in the city. Not so down here. He felt like he could fall up and up, the way kids are supposed to feel when they lie on their backs at night and look at the sky.

That had never happened to him in the city, but once, when he was very young, his parents had closed the store for a weekend and taken him on a trip to the Catskills. He'd slept the whole way, and when he woke up, it was dark and they were at a motel and everybody was getting out of the car. The lights in the parking lot had been burned out, and he'd looked up and suddenly felt sick and afraid, and had buried his face against his mother's breast until they were inside. The memory embarrassed him, and he tried to make it go away.

Across the road the untended rows of a vast field lay etched in gray and silver. Not more than a hundred yards away was the dark bulk of a house.

The grass in the yard hissed around his feet, and burrs pierced his socks. He thought of snakes again, but forged on. The steps of the porch creaked alarmingly. Under the porch roof the door was a black rectangle, with air moving in stale currents from within. He smelled dust and mildew and rot. The house had to be deserted. Beyond it the road snaked on, through more trees and past farther fields. There was another dark shape that might have been a barn of another house, but no lights. Realizing that he was close to being out of earshot, and more afraid of what some

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trucker might say to him if the man found he'd left Monica alone than really worried about any danger to her, he decided to turn back.

He found her sitting on the hood, smoking a cigarette. The jack and the flat tire were both stored in the back of the car.

"You got the spare on O.K.?"

She nodded. "No problem. Unfortunately, the banks of the ditch are slick and steep, and I don't have the room to turn to make at them head-on. You were right. Without a tow truck, we're stuck here."

He sat beside her, feeling oddly calm. So much for the idea that helping her record material would make for a nice, restful vacation from typing his thesis. Still, maybe later they could look back on all this as an adventure.

He pointed up at the sky. "I'm not used to such bright stars. They look like diamonds on black velvet." She didn't respond to the image. "All right, so I'm a lousy poet." Thank God he'd never shown her any of the stuff he'd written back when he was an undergraduate and an English major.

"Find any houses?" she asked at length.

"One. It was deserted." He slid off the hood. "It can't be too bad a walk back up to that diner. I bet our waitress friend knows somebody with a tow truck."

She took one last puff and dropped her cigarette. "You're right. At least I'll be able to call Mom and Dad."

The embankment directly beside them was very steep and slick, but a few hundred feet back, it was more gradual. Not wanting to have to struggle up the rise and look foolish, he started walking along the ditch to the place where the climb would be easier. "Wait," she said from behind him. Before he could pause and look back, he tripped over something and went sprawling.

"Steve, are you O.K.?"

Except for a skinned elbow, he was. Sitting up, he turned the penlight on the dark mass he'd tripped over.

"What is it?" asked Monica, catching up to him.

"Just a bundle of oily rags."

She stared at it. "No," she said at last. "No, it's not."

He looked again, seeing dark cloth and then the darker stains soaking through the tatters. In the middle of the scattered mass was a loop of something that glistened. The light picked out a tennis shoe and then a

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pale hand. There didn't seem to be any head.

Steve scrambled backward until he couldn't control his nausea, then doubled over to vomit. Monica bent over him and gently held his shoulder. "We must have driven right past it without knowing it was in the ditch."

"It's a body," he said unnecessarily, not really hearing her.

She held him, although he didn't want her to. "I know."

"What could have done that?"

"A truck maybe — hit-and-run." Her voice was as calm as a newscaster's. Usually, he envied her her strength, but now it just made him feel weaker.

"But the head was gone." He immediately regretted saying that, irrationally fearing she might want to look for it or something.

"Dogs could have been at it," she continued clinically. "Even a bear."

He stiffened at the word. With a bear, you didn't need a hit-and-run to explain what had happened. He thought of the grunting black things that begged food by the trailer camps, slow and greedy and calm as big dogs. He thought of the reservations, where some loophole in federal law allowed the animals to be kept under even the most cramped conditions, and every service station and rest stop had its own LIVE BEARS sweltering away in a chain-link cage with an asphalt floor. If one of those panting brutes ever got loose, it might well want to do something like this. He thought of watching *Gentle Ben* as a kid, and how the big, whuffling bear, supposedly as friendly and loyal as Lassie, had terrified him, so much so that he had begged his parents to change the channel.

Monica suddenly stood up. "Steve," she said softly, her hand firmly grasping his and pulling him upright, "let's start walking slowly the other way. Be calm, and don't look back."

He walked and didn't look. "Why?"

"Something big crossed the road back there. Keep walking."

They passed the car. Why didn't they just get inside? He started to say something, then thought of being trapped in there while something large and hairy snuffled against the windshield. The pines loomed ahead.

They were in the resin-scented shadow, when Monica let go of his hand. "Run," she said.

They bounced over the gravel, past the whispering untended field. He meant to point out the bulk of the house, but, ten paces ahead of him, she'd already seen it. Her speed increased as she plunged into the tall

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grass. He panted, nearly tripped over something metallic, and strove to catch up. The porch stairs groaned under her pounding Nikes. Pausing, she leaned out of the darkness and urged him on.

Almost sure he heard something plowing through the tangled weeds behind him, he stumbled on, his heart roaring. One of the rotted steps actually cracked under his feet, but he was off it and on the porch before it gave way. Monica was at his arm, first pulling him toward, then pushing him into, the blackness.

The door to the house must have been open rather than missing as he'd first supposed, because there was a slamming sound behind him, and then he couldn't see a thing. He switched on the penlight. It caught peeling wallpaper, holes in the floorboards, Monica's hand's fumbling beside the doorframe. Finding a bar, she slid it home, then turned toward him.

He held the penlight on her face. "What was out there?"

She pushed the light away, taking him by the hand and turning off the beam. "Nothing." The darkness rushed in, heavy with mold and something else. What was she doing?

"Monica?"

"I'm not Monica," she said gently. "That was Monica in the ditch beside the road."

The hand holding his began to grow.

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FILMS

HARLAN ELLISON'S WATCHING

Installment 32: *In Which the Switch Is Thrown*

IT OFTEN seems laughable to me how I, and other film critics, ceaselessly belabor the lack of verisimilitude in films. As a practitioner of fiction —

the pure cobbling-up of lies that have the *semblance* of truth but which are, at splashdown, merely inventions abutting Reality only where necessary to sucker in the reader

— it does frequently seem to me to be a hypocritical carp that operates off a double standard, serving the critic in a not entirely respectable fashion.

Like demanding a greater nobility from oppressed peoples than that demonstrated by those who oppress them. South Africa, for instance. Botha's government can repress, brutalize, maim, lock-out, censor, incarcerate, and kill — and that's "maintaining order." But let a Homelands black pick up a rock and shag it at an Afrikander with a water cannon, and it's "terrorist activity."

Yet when we reach the target area of criticism, it is just such an unsettling absence of verisimilitude that looms largest in our judgments of a film's worth. Our trust can be lost in an instant. Just one flip we don't believe, and we're off the menu. Go figure.

I'm not talking about technical or factual errors that don't impede the flow of story. (The kind that apologists for films, as well as arrogant producers and studio flacks, sneer at, and say, "Who the hell will know the difference?" Thus allowing, even condoning, the perpetuation of intentional or just dumbheaded corruptions of fact for "story value.") I'm not talking about releasing a film titled *Krakatoa: East of Java*, when that volcanic island actually lies in the Sunda Strait, *west* of Java. I'm not talking about

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having the sun set in the east in the recent film *Sunset*, or having the sun rising in the west in *The Green Berets*. I'm not talking about having Metropolis (which is New York City) and the Great Wall of China simultaneously in daylight in *Superman IV*, though they're on opposite sides of the planet, Daily or otherwise. I'm not talking about ex-slaves in the crowd scenes of *Spartacus* wearing wristwatches.

That sort of thing is pooh-pooh'd by the same phylum of semi-literate plant life that excuses the soundtrack explosions in deep space and the whoooosh of spaceships as they dart around in imbecile imitation of Spads and Fokkers (a convention now so institutionalized that I've thrown up my hands and swear never to mention it again). No, I'm not talking about such thousand natural shocks to which the flesh is heir.

I'm talking about the visual *shticks* that make us groan. The moments we are expected to accept, in action films usually, that wrench from an audience the involuntary cry of, "Oh, fer chrissakes, gimme a *break!*"

I suppose, for want of proper ThinkTank stats on this, that something like a Common Sense Switch cuts in, when we're asked to believe the foma of filmmakers. We seem to have no trouble accepting, say, the convention of Wile E. Coyote standing in mid-air, just beyond the lip of the cliff, looking around for the Road Runner, scratching his head, perfectly safe in defiance of the laws of the physical universe, just buoyed up by nothing, till he glances down and sees the abyss beneath his feet. We gladly accept that he has time to register a forlorn double-take, still standing in mid-air, until the epiphany of imminent gravity sinks in . . . and *then* he falls. But let the same sort of thing happen in live-action, and we deliver a raspberry at the screen that is as sincere as it is succulent. What I'm talking about is:

- James Bond hop-skipping across the backs of the alligators in *Live and Let Die*.
- Schwarzenegger in *Commando*, falling 350 feet from an L 10-11, into a swamp, getting up without even shaking his head, and trotting blithely away at peak efficiency to do battle.
- "Bones" McCoy being such an inept physician that he injects *himself* by mistake in the rewritten version of "City on the Edge of Forever."
- The rubber life raft containing Indy, Short Round and Willie not flipping upside-down like buttered bread when it's dropped, as they go over the cliff in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*; or the four-

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foot-tall Short Round karate-kicking into unconsciousness all those six-foot-tall trained *thuggee* assassins.

• "The best hired killers in the galaxy" using heat-seeking laser rifles that lock onto a target automatically, regularly missing their first shots, so they alert Sean Connery to each bushwhack in *Outland.*

• The hi-tech choppers in *Blue Thunder* strafing each other in the center of downtown high-rise Los Angeles, blowing up buildings that rain glass and concrete on crowds, and harming not one pedestrian, save when they are pelted by fried chickens.

• *Robocop* firing through the skirt of a woman hostage, missing her pudenda, and searing off the balls of the thug holding her up in front of him as a shield.

• Stallone, in *Rambo: First Blood II* apparently doing what cannot be done by a human being, when he literally *flies* up from a lake to the port of a chopper hovering twenty-five feet above the water. Apparently kicking off from the lake bottom and defying water pressure to break all world's championship high jumping records.

• And my all-time favorite: the assassins of *Rame Tep,* by the hundreds, come-and-go to-and-from a gigantic wooden pyramid built smack in the middle of Victoria's London, in *Young Sherlock Holmes,* and no one has ever noticed the tons of building materials schlepped into the area, nor heard the sound of sawing and hammering, nor paid any attention to the skinheaded hordes frequenting the vicinity.

What I'm talking about here is, "Oh, fer chrissakes, gimme a *break!*"

In that instant, the Common Sense Switch is thrown, and they've lost us. From that instant forward, they have to work very hard, very diligently, and with absolute purity of intent to win back our willing suspension of disbelief. (For all of us, that is, save those undiscriminating filmgoers who perceive of their lot in life as being one with the doorknob: to be turned and shoved and left covered with smudgy handprints. Those who *expect* to be lied to, and don't think they can do anything about it. Those who cannot summon up sufficient feelings of self-worth to believe they are *due* something truer and more inventive. Those who believe in *boom!* and *whoooosh!*)

It is the single cinematic common denominator that brooks no defense, that unites even navel-lint examiners like me with F/X-dulled adolescents like a very few of you. Such importunate demands on audience credibility can be *seen,* and the groans are pandemic; whether interpreted by a critic as "the film suffers from a herky-jerky

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rhythm" or by the casual filmgoer as "I didn't believe it . . . it was dumb." Dumb, as in dull-witted, stupid; not as in speechless.

That having been said, I submit (without the faintest ort of anger or outrage, truly more in sorrow than glee) that the instant throwing of the Common Sense Switch by whole theaters-full of movie nuts is the reason WILLOW (MGM/ Lucasfilm) died a quick and awful death at the box office, while WHO FRAMED ROGER RABBIT (Touchstone) has made more than one hundred and fifty million dollars to the date I write this. And both deserve what they got: though the former is live-action, meticulously rendered with as much state of the art cleverness as a $35 million budget can buy in terms of the most accomplished technicians in the world; and the latter is utterly whacky, combining jaw-popping animation and live-action players pantomiming and reacting against *toons* that were not there when they spoke their lines. The former, for all its heavy-breathing and sweaty struggles to make fantasy realms mimetic, is not for a moment believable. The latter, despite its clearly deranged juxtaposition of animated cartoons and live knockabout comedy, captures our trust from the first frames.

Apart from the awesome risk-taking of *Roger Rabbit*, from original conception to final cut, there is a surefootedness, an imperial arrogance at its brave beastliness, a confidence in its ability to cajole even Scrooge into adoration, that one cannot find in parallel unless one goes back to *Alien*, *Fantasia*, *Pinocchio* or the 1939 *Thief of Bagdad*.

(The film becomes a yardstick. You show me someone who has seen *Roger Rabbit*, whose face doesn't break into an idiot grin, who doesn't fall over him/herself to recollect a shot, a shtick, a boffo line that brought convulsions, who prefaces any remarks with, "Well, I have problems with it . . ." and I'll show you a Grinch unfit to live with decent people. You show me someone who didn't like, who didn't *love* that film, and I'll show you someone whose opinion on *any*thing should not be trusted. In a world ass-deep in cupidity, ineptitude, meanspiritedness, fanaticism, random violence and anguish, how often are we given a treasure like *Roger Rabbit*, a dear soft fuzzy thing that asks only that we be happy and roll around in it like a puppy in a goose-down comforter? You show me a damfool who carps about *any*thing in *Roger Rabbit*, and I'll show you . . . someone who likes eating lima beans.)

Deponent sayeth this: the fault lies not in its stars, but in its basic

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conception. *Willow*, that is. I'll get to the conception of *Roger Rabbit* anon. Because of its excellence, it requires less attention. We learn more from failures than from successes, because if a success is based on originality, then by deconstructing it, by trying to analyze it and codify it, we only find the replicable elements. And that's of value primarily if we're trying to emulate the success in an imitation. By the very nature of its originality, it ran risks that could not be gauged beforehand. It's akin to dissecting a butterfly to learn why it flies as it does, and in so doing, we destroy the beauty that was its essence. And since this column is foursquare against cheap imitations, we need not shred *Roger Rabbit* merely to discover that it was the first of its kind to go as far as it did. We know that. And we know *that's* why it wows. But *Willow* falls far and falls fast and falls flat: from which height we can learn the angle and severity of the trajectory of failure.

Deponent sayeth: the fault lies in George Lucas. No one else had a hand in it. Not the hundreds of technicians, not the actors, not the unfortunate writer Bob Dolman, who was called in to complete the script, not even one of the names or companies we see on the extended credits. It was George Lucas who (as pre-release publicity told us) "studied myths from around the world before defining *Willow* to his satisfaction." It is the film Lucas wanted to make, based on the story Lucas dreamed up, exec-produced by Lucas, and directed in Lucas fashion by his hand-picked choice, Ron Howard.

And what are we presented with?

The "saga" of Willow Ufgood is a ramekin of congealed porridge and curdled cream. There is far more farina than fantasy in this wearisome, woebegone farrago of stolen set-pieces and New Age muddleheadedness. George Lucas has either taken utter leave of his senses, or the world of today has taken utter leave of George Lucas. For this is the kind of sloppy, inarticulate, inconsistent, unbelievable, fuzzyheaded crap that flower children read to one another in crash pads in Iowa. After half a century of C.S. Lewis, Mervyn Peake, Clifford Simak, Daniel Manus Pinkwater, *Time Bandits*, Madeleine L'Engle, Fritz Leiber and — though most prominently, scarcely my fave — J.R.R. Tolkien, for a rational adult even remotely *au courant* to believe this pile of unwashed hand-me-downs has any freshness, is a delusion at least on a par with those held by Ponce de Leon, Mary Baker Eddy, and Bishop James Ussher.

Instead of Moses in the bullrushes, we have a cynical nod to

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NOW and a silly male's idea of feminism with the foundling converted to baby girl. Instead of *Snow White*'s Queen Grimhilde, we have Queen Bavmorda, rasping, clenching, *geshrying*, and seeking the death of this child bearing "the sign" that a seer has vouchsafed marks the one who will overthrow the evil ruler. Instead of Han Solo, we have Val Kilmer as the cocky freebooter Madmartigan: liar, deceiver, cutpurse, self-server, but with a whore's heart of iron pyrite. Instead of Munchkins, we have Nelwyns. At least they don't have fuzzy feet. Instead of—

But you catch my drift.

Hand-me-downs. Flotsam and jetsam from a thousand ripoff Middle-Earth, Middle-Ages, Middle-Class fantasies. Cobbled together into one of those interminable "journey" templates where an unruly assortment of bizarre traveling companions dash about like Michael Jackson fans in search of scalpers' tickets. Weird beasties, much senseless swordplay, magic without logic introduced helter-skelter when the "plot" begins to falter, noise and fireworks . . . and none of it able to pluck the heartstrings, much less appeal to the rational.

All of it, despite its pomposity and bench-press sweatiness intended to convince us it's possible, nothing but impetus for the throwing of the Common Sense Switch. We watch it, we leave, and we forget it. Having wasted our time and our ticket money.

George Lucas has wasted years, however.

Following, as it does, on the heels of Lucas's last bold plunge into idiocy, *Howard the Duck*, we can only stare in utter ~~confusion~~ at such a suicidal effort. Has Lucas taken leave of his senses? Did he truly think there was anything in this mush to compell our love?

Deponent suggests the Blight of Shirley MacLaine has caught up with the Executive Producer.

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In an upcoming essay it is my intention to go at considerable length to an examination of the Illiterate Audience. Not now. But part of the thesis is prefaced in the artifact called *Willow*. That element of the total theory dealing with the rampant spread of obscurantism that manifests itself in the foolish antics of pseudo-Christians at *The Last Temptation of Christ*, the resurgence of acceptance of spiritualism, now called "channeling," the goofy vogue for crystals, traveling to "focus locations" for Harmonic Convergences, the seeming lack of outrage that the Reagan Oligarchy regularly consulted and paid heed to a court astrologer (the last major world leader to have such a soothsayer on the payroll was Hitler, if you recall), and all the other sophomoric diddles the average citizen now considers part of the Rational Universe. Geraldo Rivera and Oprah and Morton Dunderhead, Jr, present . . .

Road signs on the journey back into ignorance.

And *Willow*, product of this New Age nonsense, tells a story that not even the shriven can tolerate. Dulled, confused, awash in their own inability to cope with a world filled with tax forms and interfacing and accessing and Star Wars Defense Systems, a world in which mediocre men seek to be President and giant corporations truly rule, a world in which blame can only be supported if it can be laid at the feet of Chance or God, even in such a world the faithful cannot accept such arrant nonsense.

And the Common Sense Switch is thrown.

We can only be thankful that we have been given *Roger Rabbit*. A film as mad as anything we've ever seen; a story as unlikely as any we've ever known; a dream and a delight that for all its unbelievable elements, is more down-to-earth and sensible than the "realistic" films we're told reflect Our Times.

Deponent suggests we ponder for an instant, without anger and without raising our voices, in what a lowly state we exist, that the most rational icon given to us to adore, is an adaptation of Gary Wolf's bugfuck novel, in a cinematic ordering of what used to be considered absolute fantasy. Is something odd here, or did I wake up this morning in an alternate universe?

Further, deponent sayeth not.

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Today people often exclaim, "I've got to take control of my life!" Thomas Wylde ("Magic Cookies" December 1985) takes this common idea and craftily makes it into something extraordinary. In this story he shows the result of taking control — complete control.

The Man Who Controlled Himself

By Thomas Wylde

SUDDENLY THE *CHUNKA-CHUNKA* music came on again, blasting through the ceiling so hot and fast and loud that Simon Norge couldn't hear his own heartbeat.

"Beat!" he commanded his heart as he reached for the stereo's remote control. He pushed the button, and all the lights in the apartment went out. Wrong remote.

"Beat!" he said again, digging through the pile of remote controls in his lap — lights, TV, intercom, panic button.

"Beat!" he said, his anger rising. The *chunka-chunka* music pounded the ceiling, dusting him with plaster.

It was those damned Haitians again. One week in the building, and already they were making his life a misery.

"BEAT," he said, finding the right control and pointing it at the stereo. The tape deck began to roll.

At once the boosted sound of a human heart blasted forth and filled the room in vain competition with the *chunka-chunka* music. Norge's

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thumb pressed the volume button flush with the plastic. A thrilling, thunderous heartbeat boomed from the speakers, then a gob of smoke rose like a mushroom cloud from the amplifier, and the heartbeat died with the bleat of a diesel truck horn.

"Damn! I mean, 'Beat!'"

He took a breath and began to thump his heart in time to the silent mnemonic jingle he'd made up two years ago.

With great concentration, he crept across the room and knelt before a box of junked timers under the dining room table. He pawed through the hardware, digging past corroded egg timers and busted clocks and plastic cuckoo houses where headless feathered shuttlecocks wedged themselves halfway through tiny doors. At last he dug out the old pendulum-driven metronome.

He placed it on the table and dropped into a chair, then set the mechanism in motion at eighty beats a minute, squeezing his heart every time the lever crossed the center line.

He established the following program:

1. Count ten heartbeats.
2. Breathe in.
3. Blink twice.
4. Ten more heartbeats.
5. Breathe out.
6. Blink twice.
7. Go to 1.

A battered mop handle leaned against the wall, busted yesterday banging the ceiling. The Haitians ignored him.

Bastards! he thought, missing a beat. What the hell am I going to do? They're killing me!

Yes, it was time to make sweat.

Someone was screaming.

Norge checked to make sure it wasn't him, then let his head flop back to stare at the cracked ceiling.

The *chunka-chunka* music was still eating its way through the plaster, but that wasn't all. Now the folks up there were shrieking at one another in some bastardized form of French. A man and a woman. No, a man and *two* women!

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He swore, lost count, and tried to suck air into lungs already full. He coughed dangerously — his heart stopped, awaiting instructions — then emptied his lungs in hissing puffs, missing four more heartbeats in the process.

"Jesus," he said, dizzily focusing first one eye then the other on the metronome's flicking lever.

After a moment he noticed how slippery the seat was.

"Mother of Meat!"

He had forgotten to stop sweating. Now he was drenched, and there was a puddle on the floor beneath the chair.

No wonder he was missing heartbeats. His electrolyte balance had to be all screwed up, and — oh *shit!* — there wasn't a drop of Gatorade in the house.

Already he could feel his heart resist the beat, as if it were swiftly turning to hard rubber.

The screaming from upstairs got louder, then the music boomed, all scraped up and distorted. There was a heavy crash, and the music stopped. The screaming continued: a man, two women, and a vast number of squalling children. Perfect!

Oh, and now someone was pounding on his door. Norge turned to look, missed another beat, and nearly choked.

The door opened, and he really did choke. It was Penny, the woman from across the hall, jingling her keys as she came inside. "I found another book on hormones," she said, holding the text up beside her leer. "Couldn't hurt!"

Norge winced. The woman was pretty and smart and caring, and for six months he'd been fighting her off with a broom handle. Couldn't she take a hint? He watched her toss the text onto the emptied-out highboy with all the other medical data that he studied as fiercely as if his life depended on them. Which, of course, it did.

She went on into the kitchen. He made saliva and swallowed it. "Add to — beat — the list — beat — some Gator — beat — ade."

Penny was already frowning at the list. "Now I've told you not to sweat so much!"

"A man's — beat — gotta sweat — beat — when a man's — beat — gotta sweat."

She laughed as she mixed up a jug of emergency hydrator — a pinch of

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salt, a handful of sugar, a quart of water. "I told you I could put in another air conditioner, with a mister so I could dial in the humidity. It'd be simple to program a microcontroller to—"

"No more — beat — remote — beat — controls!" Norge said. He depended on the good woman and her engineering expertise, but he hated being reminded.

"We'll see," she said, handing him the drink.

While he sipped the awful stuff, she just stood there, folding the list tighter and tighter.

"What?" said Norge.

"You know I love you."

Oh God — those horrible words again!

She said, "You can't stay cooped up like this forever, baby. Life is passing you by!"

Norge frowned.

"I brought someone to see you, Simon. A social worker."

Norge frowned harder.

"Honey, it's for your own damned good!"

Norge had to be careful not to make his blood boil.

"I understand agoraphobia," the man was saying. "And I know just what you ought to do."

His name was Donald something and his cologne was making Norge dizzy.

"It's not — beat — agora — beat — phobia!" Norge was also annoyed by the man's supercilious attitude, and the fraudulent way he combed sparse hair across his pink forehead. Norge brushed his own hair back nervously, noticed some thinning, and immediately began to stimulate his follicles.

Donald said, "But Miss Boone tells me you haven't left your apartment in two years. She says you're afraid of losing control, a feeling that's entirely consistent with—"

"It's not that," said Penny. "He's afraid — he says — of being distracted. He has to keep himself . . . running."

"Running?"

"Running!" said Norge, trying to make all this sound reasonable.

"It seems he has no autonomic systems," said Penny. "So he has to do

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everything for himself." She glanced at Norge for confirmation. "It's really a lot of work, isn't it, honey?"

Norge nodded wearily.

Donald stared at him with a look of bemused disbelief. "I see. Go on."

"What he needs," said Penny, entering her engineering phase, "is programming — and some kind of central processing unit to run it, with a program clock, and I/O interfaces, and feedback loops, and—"

Donald was shaking his head.

Norge was smelling smoke.

Penny said, "He could use a cardiac pacemaker, too, but he won't let the surgeons go to work on him."

"Butchers!" said Norge.

She shrugged.

Donald said, "And this has been going on for two years?"

"He never told me exactly what," said Penny, "but something happened to burn out the system."

That's right, and Norge could smell it burning now.

Donald said, "I would like very much to know how it happened, Mr. Norge."

Penny perked up, but pretended to study the weave of her skirt.

"It's a — beat — peculiar — beat — story," said Norge. He sniffed at the air. Yes, yes, there it was again, an acrid stench of smoke lurking behind the acrid stench of Donald's cologne.

The man was smiling at him. "You're among friends."

Upstairs, the Haitians were banging the walls. The music came on again, blistering loud, then went off. More screams.

Norge sighed, and motioned for Penny to sit beside him. He gave her his hand, and she began to squeeze it rhythmically with a big one every fifth beat to remind him to breathe.

"It helps him to concentrate on the words," said Penny.

Donald nodded, a smile tickling his lips.

"O.K., here goes," said Norge, getting into sync with the beat. "I guess it all began when I lost the end of my little finger in a sushi restaurant. I thought the man was through hacking at the tuna, but he wasn't."

He paused while they examined his hands. There was nothing wrong with any of his fingers.

Donald's head went back. "Oh, I get it. They sewed the tip back on.

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Damned good work, too," he said, looking for a scar.

Norge shook his head. "As a matter of fact, they never found the fingertip. I think it got served to the folks at the next table."

"You're telling me it grew back?" said Donald.

"Don't be silly," said Penny. "What do you think he is, a lizard?"

"No, he's right," said Norge. "Eventually it did grow back, but, for the first few months, all it did was throb. I thought I was going to die. And the worst thing was, it hurt the most right at the end, on a part of the finger that wasn't even there anymore."

"Phantom pain," said Donald.

"Drugs couldn't touch it," said Norge. "And brother, I tried them all, along with a bunch of off-the-wall stuff — guided imagery, white noise, cream of rhinoceros horn soup. You name it; if it showed up in the *National Enquirer*, I tried it."

"Poor baby," said Penny.

"I was ready to kill myself. I even bought a gun."

"Simon!" she said, losing track of the count.

"Beat — beat — beat," said Norge, throwing in a couple extra. "It's true. I sat down at the kitchen table—"

Penny was looking around. "Do you smell—"

"Smoke," said Norge, nodding. "And I put that gun to my head—"

"Oh my goodness!" said Donald. Then his expression shifted. "What do you mean, smoke?"

"— and I cocked the hammer . . . ," said Norge, sniffing again. Now there was something else in the air — something that scared him worse than any whiff of smoke.

Kerosene. Lighter fluid, Charcoal lighter. He didn't know what. Something horribly flammable.

He leaned close for a big whiff of Donald's odious cologne. No, it wasn't him.

Shrieks pierced the ceiling.

"The hell is that?" Donald was saying.

The ceiling thumped, a door banged, and then the noises — the screams, the warnings, the wailing of terrified children — all got louder. The party was moving downstairs.

The social worker stood in the doorway yelling, "Are you crazy?!

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Get that thing out of here!"

Norge came up behind him, Scotch-taping the heartbeat timer to his ear. Men and women yelled, and children screamed. Smoke wafted about, confusing everything, but finally Norge focused a couple of eyes on the object of contention: a smoldering mattress.

The man was pulling it down the stairs, while one woman yelled at him, trying to haul it back to the third floor. She shrieked and jumped about, and Norge saw unholstered breasts bobbing and swinging in a Port-au-Prince T-shirt. She appeared to be in the peak of health.

Penny crossed the hall to her door, as the mattress — hot spots glowing, smoke puffing — thumped to the landing a few feet away.

At that moment the Haitian woman produced a can of charcoal lighter and squeezed a stream of reeking fluid at the mattress. As flames exploded, she laughed, resisting attempts of the other woman to wrestle the can away. Another squeeze of lighter fluid doused Penny down the front of her dress.

"Hey!" said Penny.

The Haitian man jerked the flaming mattress backward, knocking Penny to the floor, and began to drag the mattress across her wriggling body. She scrambled to get up without coming in contact with the spark that would set her aflame.

Norge beat his heart fast, breathed in once, and held it. He shoved the Haitian gentleman away, then yanked Penny to her feet, slinging her past Donald and through his open door.

He fought the man over possession of the mattress until the woman sprayed more lighter fluid, and flames jumped up. Norge lashed out and decked her. The children began to squeal and jump about, and the man came at Norge, swearing lustily in a very pretty language.

Norge beat his heart a bunch of times, blinked like mad, and filled the muscles of his right arm with about a quart of adrenaline. One quick jab, and the man folded up like an old lawn chair.

Norge got hold of the mattress again and dragged it down the final flight of stairs to the street. He swung it around onto the sidewalk, then jumped over the railing into the entrance well of the super's apartment. He found the garden hose, spun the valve, and climbed back up with the spraying hose in his teeth.

It took but a moment to drench the mattress, and folks stopped on the street to watch the steam rise.

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The terrible stink of lighter fluid crept up behind him like a mugger, and someone took his hand. His eyes focused hopelessly.

My God, he thought. What have I done?

"Oh Simon," she said. "You were magnificent!"

The next half hour was a blurred medley of sirens and firemen and cops and television camera crews.

Norge sat on the stoop, crowded and hemmed in, the awful stench of Penny's flammable dress filling his senses. He beat his heart and blinked and breathed and barely had wit enough remaining to envision the distant future when he might collapse in his apartment alone.

Please God, alone. . . .

"You burned your fingers," Penny said. "Do they hurt?"

"Never," he mumbled, alerting his immune system.

Donald shoved the television crews back as best he could, but Norge was semiconscious of a steady stream of shouted questions and pleas. Deadlines approached, film at five.

Finally, Norge made a statement, with Penny's help, finding her hand uncomfortably warm and moist. He avoided her eyes. "I will answer any question to which the answer is not already obvious."

From then on he could relax, as he was certain none of the television reporters could crack this code.

Meanwhile, the police couldn't find the lighter fluid lady, so they busted her sister. When the man began to scream, they Maced him and dragged him out, too. Norge endured the man's kick as cops hustled him down the steps.

Angry voices floated back to him, foreign and intriguing, and for a while the bright television lights swung around to capture this dramatic moment of vicious urban threat, leaving Norge in the growing darkness.

"O.K.," said Donald, skootching close. "You had the gun to your head and the hammer pulled back."

Norge nodded glumly. Let's get this over with. . . .

"My finger slowly tightened on the trigger, then — at the last second — I jerked the gun away and blew this humongous hole in the kitchen wall. I just stared at that hole and said to my brain, 'All right, you slime-bag, you're the bastard in charge of phantom pain, and you're the one that's going to turn it off. If it doesn't stop in five seconds, I'm gonna spread you all over the wallpaper.'"

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"In two weeks I had grown the end of my finger back — just by demanding it."

"You shouldn't talk to your brain like that," said Donald. "It's dangerous."

Norge shrugged. "Well, it worked. I counted to five . . . and the pain stopped. And that's not all. In two weeks I had grown the end of my finger back — just by demanding it. I had taken control."

Donald said, "But I thought you had lost control, that your autonomic system had—"

"Coming to that," said Norge. "For the next few weeks, I just enjoyed myself, running all over the place, doing all kinds of stuff." He noticed the way Penny was looking at him, and decided to skip over this part. "Eventually I got a little too . . . ambitious. Fixing my finger was gonna be just the beginning, right? I wanted to do something big. I wanted to rework my body, to make myself strong, to make myself undeniable, to make myself . . . Superman."

"Hubris," said Donald, nodding.

"I had demanded too much," said Norge, "and my brain rebelled. One night, when I was in — well, it doesn't matter where I was. The deal was, I heard a voice deep inside saying, 'All right, clown. You wanna control everything, fine. Do it. Control *every*thing.' After that I had to remember to beat my own heart and breathe and digest food and so forth — the whole nasty business of living. I was in control, all right, but it was hell."

Donald said, "And this is the first time you've been out of your apartment in two years. . . ."

"I'm so proud of him!" said Penny, squeezing his hand with love. Norge's heart contracted in a frenzy of miscued beats.

"The hardest part," he said, after a breathless moment, "is never really sleeping."

Cops were leaving. The pavement vibrated as a fire truck rumbled away, and the street crowd began to break up.

Penny said in his ear, "We can go back inside now."

Norge rose at once, and the television lights flared.

"Mr. Nudge! Mr. Nudge!"

"Gentlemen, please!" Donald said, raking hair across his gleaming pate.

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"I'm ready to make a statement now!" He was instantly surrounded by media thugs and hauled into the maelstrom.

Norge never saw that brave man again. As he climbed the stairs, he thumped his heart with every step. Penny was right behind him, stinking of hydrocarbons.

Somehow he managed to get the door shut in Penny's face without becoming exactly brutal.

Unfortunately, it didn't take. Ten minutes later she was back in her red bathrobe, smelling of Lifebuoy and demanding to cook him dinner. "I do a thing with ground round that'll rip your face off," she said ominously, pushing her way inside. "It's the least I could do."

As she stood before the open refrigerator, he gloomily flicked on his appetite. Then she bent down for a handful of potatoes, half turning to give him a glimpse of the way her robe parted on top, and Norge looked away, fumbling with his appetite switch again.

The woman was playing hardball, all right. He wondered how long she had practiced that revealing move.

He left her to the task of whipping something up from his meager rations — the shopping list folded and forgotten on the end table — and went back to the big chair, shoving the remote controls aside.

An hour later he sat mulling over his sour stomach as the six o'clock news lit up the television. Penny sat on the arm of his chair. She seemed to have moved in.

She squealed when his story came on, and he looked up to study the terror in the eyes of the man huddled on the stoop.

"Just look at the progress you've made today," said Penny. "Sitting outside and everything."

"I almost — beat — died."

"But you respond so well to pressure."

He glanced at her. Was that a threat?

Meanwhile, the news commentator was suggesting that heroism like Mr. Nudge's ought to be acknowledged by the city — and reminded the audience that such a citizens' award ceremony was just getting under way.

Norge's panicked face filled the screen. "While all others are losing

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their heads," the commentator said, "it's encouraging to see one man who remains in control."

"Just — beat — barely," muttered Norge.

Penny aimed the remote control, and the commentator winked out. She snuggled closer and took his hand. "Let's talk," she said, her robe falling open again.

Norge coughed, beat, beat, beat.

"This silly old thing," she said, caressing her terry cloth lapels. "I don't know why I bother with it."

"Um," said Norge, knowing any comment could be misinterpreted.

A memory was haunting him. He'd told her how he'd got ambitious and been slapped down by his brain. What he hadn't mentioned was that he'd been in bed with a woman at the time. He had tried to become the Man of Steel, all right — with disastrous results.

"Penny . . . honey," he said, looking away. "We've been over this a million times. Sex is just too . . . dangerous . . . for me. I have to keep my wits about me, babe. It's a matter of life and death."

"So you say." She moved closer, the bathrobe drooping.

"It's true, believe me," he said, his heart quivering.

"Sure, baby," she mumbled, nibbling his ear.

Monster! he thought. The woman wants to kill me!

"Beat-beat, beat-beat."

"Uh-oh," said Penny. "Somebody's getting a happy-on."

"Well, it's not me!"

He wouldn't know where to look for such a thing. His eyes raised to the highboy, where the new book on hormones rested. Man of Steel, ha! Man of Mush.

All the lights went out.

"That's just me," she said, her voice buzzing against his neck. He heard the remote control hit the floor.

Her hand reached into his shirt, and his heart stopped for a while. He cleared his throat and blinked. He couldn't seem to focus either one of his eyes. It was time to make sweat.

From upstairs suddenly there came more *chunka-chunka* music. Voices chanted and wailed, and the ceiling thumped and crackled with dancing feet.

He hardly noticed.

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She moved closer, her tongue darting into his ear.

"Stop . . . ," he squeaked, his voice pitched higher than a bat's.

The monster wasn't listening. Monsters never do.

"Stop . . . ," he groaned, his voice subsonic.

The monster paused only long enough to say, "Your body is getting all slippery."

"Stop . . . ," he tried to say, but though the word came out on a human frequency, it sounded more like "Glollop."

The monster replied, "I think sweat is an aphrodisiac, don't you?"

"Beat — beat," he said, more or less.

Attacked by the monster of love. He was doomed.

All around them, people were beating on walls and screaming, fists pounding, voices rising, drums throbbing, dancers clumping, walls buckling, plaster drifting down like cocaine from heaven, clouding his mind. Sirens drifted in from the street.

Forget it, he thought. Let it go.

He'd managed two years of pointless, extended life, but now the game was over. The hell with it.

The monster continued to paw his quaking body, devastating his helpless senses. Let it go. Let it go.

"That's better," she said.

It was over. Let it go.

"That's the way," she said.

Give it up.

"Here we go," she said.

Wait a minute.

"Oh yes," she said.

Something was happening. . . .

"This is it," she said.

Gosh. . . .

There *were* primitive buttons of arousal buried deep within his reptilian brain stem, and her lovely fingerprints were all over them.

"Goodness . . . ," he said, feeling very strange. It had never been quite like this. . . .

Then a searing pain plowed through his chest, stealing air from his lungs.

I knew it! I knew it!

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Spikes pounded through his forehead.

I'm going to die now. . . .

Another knife plunged repeatedly into his groin, probing for the spot with the juiciest pain.

Thank *God* I'm going to die now. . . .

His skin went cold and wet, his nostrils filling with the heart-stopping aroma of kerosene.

Sirens wailed in the street outside; frenzied voices banged the walls outside his apartment: a woman screamed, a man yelled, the crowd roared, and *chunka-chunka* music played throughout.

Penny raised her head. "What's that, honey?"

The door burst open, and there in silhouette was a cop struggling with a woman over the limp body of a child. Norge blinked and focused and coughed. The pain in his chest stopped abruptly, and he heard something clatter to the hardwood floor. A knife, shining in the hall light.

A flame shot up, pale blue, lighting the woman's contorted face. The cop yelled and leaned in to blow on her Bic. The flame stretched sideways, flickered, and went out. A fist flew up and met a face; a body slumped; another knife hit the floor, its point sticking.

Bright lights came on, and Penny fumbled with her red bathrobe. "Oh, how embarrassing."

The cop had the Haitian woman pinned to the floor, his foot planted square in the middle of Port-au-Prince. He held the baby aloft in grinning triumph, and Norge saw it was a large rag doll, garishly painted, with ratty hair pasted to its head. The doll stank of kerosene, its limp body full of gaping holes.

"My God," said Penny. "It's voodoo!"

Norge's brain sort of went all gooshy.

More sirens crowded the street. "Motorcycle cops!" somebody yelled. "Stretch limos!" yelled another. "They're coming here!"

Right here.

A mob oozed into Norge's apartment. The deputy mayor, surrounded by jostling, leather-clad cops, fought his way to the front. "Mr. Nudge, I have here a warrant for your arrest."

He winked.

Norge blinked back at him and beat his heart and huffed and puffed and wondered if there was any point in going on.

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* * *

He was dragged off to the citizens' award ceremony and honored repeatedly without mercy. By the time he made it back home, he was hysterical with missing heartbeats and ill-timed wheezings.

He collapsed in his big chair and goggled at the silent ceiling. The Haitians had been dealt with at last, but surely he would hear from them again.

He was beaten.

"Take me, Lord!" he muttered.

His heart squeezed tight for a moment, then stuttered ten times as fast as it could go. His chest knotted, lungs fluttering. His temperature shot up, and sweat poured off the left side of his body for fifteen seconds, then stopped. The hair stood up on his arms and danced the hokeypokey.

"Just kidding, Lord," he said. "Don't take me."

Chills wandered up and down his back, found their way at last to his groin, and burst into flames. A dozen erections came and went in as many seconds. Norge bit his tongue.

"Something's happening. . . ."

His toes curled down; his ears whined; his eyelids clicked. The nail on his left index finger grew half an inch and fell off, a perfect manicure. He sneezed four times, orgasmically.

"Mother of Meat!"

His head was floating away from his neck. He slept eight hours in ten minutes, then the door banged open.

"Hi!" said Penny. "Got something to show you."

He had never — believe me, never — been in her apartment before. She led him right to the bedroom. "My control room," she said.

He could believe it. Filling one whole side was a large workbench, slumping under a vast pile of electronic paraphernalia — computers, oscilloscopes, signal generators, digital VOMs.

"Like it?" she said.

"I'm impressed."

"Look at this."

One computer was lit up, its screen full of esoteric scribbling, but at the bottom was a pair of familiar words blinking in boxes.

HEARTBEAT BREATH

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Norge felt for his pulse, and found it synchronized with the blinking HEARTBEAT.

Penny nodded, grinning proudly.

He looked again. BREATH said the computer, and he sucked in air, powerless to resist.

"How. . . ."

He stumbled closer, mesmerized. Now he could hear the faint whine of machines running beneath the workbench. A wide, multicolored ribbon of wires ran out of the computer and disappeared below. He crouched down, tracing out the wires.

There was a cardboard box under the bench, full of wires and tubes and small, buzzing machines. And something else, something that twitched and jumped and vibrated helplessly in the grip of the wires, something soft and limp with ragged hair and grinning teeth.

"It's me!" said Norge, rising dizzily. His legs buckled and he fell forward, reaching for the computer's keyboard, his fist pounding the table, trying desperately to smash the machine that controlled him.

She brushed him aside, tapped some keys, and up he stood, his knees locked.

"Still a few bugs in the program," said Penny, her smile sweet and packed with love. "But you'll never have to worry about falling again," she said. "I've got you, babe. I've got you."

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Brad Ferguson writes that he is the only adult person he knows who was born, raised, and has lived his entire life on Manhattan Island. His first novel, Crisis On Centaurus, *was published in 1986. His second novel,* A Flag Full of Stars, *is to be published by Pocket Books in 1989, followed soon after by his third,* The World Next Door. *"To Tell the Troof," Brad Ferguson's humorous first story for F & SF, has in it something of a philosophical puzzle for both its characters and its readers.*

TO TELL THE TROOF

By Brad Ferguson

FATHER MORTIMER MCAleer was dozing in his favorite chair, the plush one in his study normally reserved for visitors. It was another lazy (and officially proclaimed) Sabbath afternoon on Henderson. It was a world that didn't care at all about priests or Sabbaths, so no one would bother a tired, middle-aged man in his underwear who wanted to zee a few zees, his collar off and hanging on a hook . . . except that on this particular so-called Sunday, McAleer's telephone buzzed, and kept on buzzing.

The annoying sound killed McAleer's nap. *Where's Zweebl gone to?* the priest asked himself as he roused himself to answer it. He was also more than a bit puzzled; no one ever called the mission.

McAleer activated the audio pickup; he noticed a light coating of dust, and frowned. "Hello, St. Polycarp's. This is Father McAleer."

"Hello," came a thin, piping Troof voice. "This is Klatho, controller at field. Thought I should tell you. Ship coming in, red-hot emergency.

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One-seater, Terran registry; compatriot of yours, maybe. Maybe perhaps compatriot in matters of Earthie spirituality, also. You might want to come? Twenty minutes and counting to possible big mess."

"I'll be there right away."

"Good. Everybody coming to watch. We not handle much space traffic, particularly space traffic that bounces all over sky and maybe ground, too. You hurry, now, and beat crowd. Good-bye." The Troof cut the circuit.

McAleer powered down his own unit. He knew Klatho slightly, as much as he'd been allowed to come to know any of the Troof. As for the Troof's miserable excuse for a landing field, the Teamstars had designated the local field as Class D7 — no place to set down a starship, even a small one and even under the best of circumstances. *The pilot must be in very serious trouble,* the priest told himself.

"Zweebl!" McAleer called. "Where are you?"

There was the sound of splashing. "Upstairs," came another reedy voice. "Taking bath. What up, Father Mort?"

"Emergency," McAleer called back. "Hurry up. We're leaving."

"Right there." The splashing grew frantic; then McAleer heard the hurried patter of small feet.

The priest went to his bedroom and grabbed a pair of dark slacks and a light jacket from his closet. He skipped socks; he didn't have any clean ones, anyway. Dressing quickly, he rummaged in a night table next to his bed and drew out a stole, a prayer book, a vial of oil, and his pyx. The ship's pilot could be Orthodox Catholic, and McAleer might have to administer last rites. McAleer also grabbed his small standard-issue medikit and strapped it around his potbelly; the priest had a working knowledge of what to do with most of the stuff in the kit.

"Come on, Zweebl!" McAleer called.

"Coming, Father," Zweebl said from upstairs, and the priest heard his Troof assistant bounding down the stairs — if a four-foot being who looked like an overripe plum with stubby legs and a fat, snouted blueberry for a head can be said to bound. "Here am. Let's go."

"We'll have to take the car," McAleer said. Zweebl grimaced. McAleer smiled faintly. "Is the fuel tank filled?"

"Last time I look."

"Very well. Church first. Come on." They left the mission residence through the connecting door to the small chapel.

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Once outside the darkened church, McAleer went to the altar, genuflected, and opened the door to the small tabernacle; Zweebl waited in the rear of the church. McAleer secured several consecrated wafers and placed them carefully in his pyx. *Forgive the rush, Lord,* he murmured as he hastily closed the tabernacle door.

"All done, Zweebl," he said. "Let's hurry." The two left the church by the front door.

McAleer's only transportation was an old, rusting gevster left behind by the trade group that used to be on Henderson; it had taken McAleer a great deal of tinkering to get it to run. The priest kept the heap parked by the side of the residence, covered with an old tarp; he pulled it off, getting himself rather dusty in the process, and Zweebl punched the codes to unlock the doors. The two got in, and McAleer quickly hit the ignition codes; the dual turbines started with a loud roar.

"Ye gads," said Zweebl. "Wish had ears to cover."

McAleer glanced at the fuel indicator; it showed only a quarter of a tank. McAleer could not indulge in casual conversation — he was carrying the Host — but he wished he could ask Zweebl just when he'd last looked at that indicator. It wasn't important right now — a quarter of a tank was more than enough to get them to the field and back — but it annoyed McAleer; it added an item to the list of things Zweebl had fudged.

The priest fed more power to the turbines; the gevster lifted unevenly for a foot and then came level. Dust and trash flying around them, McAleer pushed the stick forward gently, and, with a start, the gevster drunkenly wove its way ahead, trying to find its air legs.

"Here goes nothing," Zweebl said. "Every time we do this, neighbors complain like hell."

McAleer gestured Zweebl to be silent, and tapped the jacket pocket in which he was carrying the pyx. "Oh," said Zweebl, suddenly understanding. "Didn't realize. Forgive." McAleer nodded.

The gevster finally found its internal rhythm and noisily whooshed ahead on a reasonably straight course.

Fifteen minutes later the gevster roared to a halt in front of the landing field's small administration building. McAleer popped the gevster's doors, and he and Zweebl hurried out amid the settling dust and leaves.

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The control room was just off the small lobby, and boasted an excellent view of the landing field, thanks to a big window typical of Troof construction. The Troof liked light and air. Entering, McAleer could see Klatho, the field superintendent, gesturing excitedly and squeaking orders to the two other Troof in the room. Klatho noticed the arrival of McAleer and Zweebl at about the same moment.

"Hello, Father, Zweebl," Klatho called. "Ship made it through atmospheric-skip maneuver, don't ask me how. Approaching field. One hot damn pilot, that boy."

"Where on the field will the ship set down?" McAleer asked. "I should be there."

Klatho shrugged. "Anywhere it wants. Lucky if it doesn't hit town. Better you stay near building."

"Very well. May we go outside to look?"

"If you like. Don't go far. You can ride out to crash site with emergency crew, these guys, when ship set down. This O.K.?"

"Very O.K. Thank you, Klatho."

"No mention." Klatho turned back to his work; the loud Troof squeaking and bleating started again at a higher level.

McAleer turned to Zweebl. "Let's go outside."

THE SKY was a brilliant, clear seawater green; visibility was unlimited. McAleer looked in vain for a vapor trail or some other indication of the ship's imminent arrival.

Zweebl was shrilly fuming. "Can't stand that Klatho, pompous ass of *yerega* son of bitch. Self-righteous bastard. Oops, sorry twice."

McAleer ignored the outburst. "Do you see anything yet?"

"Hmmm." The Troof squinted. "Can make out little pop of electromagnetic interference, way up." He pointed. "Follow finger. You should see ship soon, that direction."

"Is it headed for the field?"

"Directly. Good pilot, that boy."

McAleer sent a few prayers the pilot's way. Soon there was a glint in the sky, in a direction almost opposite to the one Zweebl had indicated.

"I think you made a mistake. I see her," McAleer said, pointing. "Just barely."

"Can't see her by light yet," Zweebl complained. "Damn all Earthie

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predator eyes. Oops, sorry again. Um, any sign of big troubles?"

"I don't see smoke or little bits of the ship tearing off, if that's what you mean. Her flight line looks smooth enough, too."

"Oh, I see her now. Yes, you right. May make it, after all. Here's luck, Father Mort."

They watched as the ship grew bigger and bigger. The siren on the admin building's roof began to wail a final alarm.

"Still wishing for ears to cover," Zweebl complained. "Final approach now."

McAleer could see the ship's belly jets suddenly spew exhaust in an all-or-nothing braking maneuver. At fifty feet of altitude, the ship rolled over once, then stabilized. It continued to drop slowly.

"Whew!" said Zweebl. "Can't believe *that* one!" McAleer could only nod, his mouth dry.

Mere feet above the field now, its forward speed now negligible, the ship extended its landing skids. Slowly, with another roar of her belly jets, she grounded with a deep, grinding groan about five hundred feet from the admin building. The pilot killed the engines, and McAleer heard the crackle of cooling metal.

The pilot's emergency door popped open, and a chute rolled out. A figure in an old-fashioned, bulky spacesuit — obviously the pilot — slipped down the chute as easily as if the thing had been greased. The pilot ran madly away from the ship.

"Get *down*, Zweebl!" yelled McAleer, hitting the dirt and covering his head with his hands. Zweebl followed suit.

The small ship gave up the ghost and, with thundering report, blew itself to shards. The pilot, still too close, was caught by the blast and tossed head over heels.

McAleer and Zweebl felt a hot gust of air and bits of dirt and debris rush over them; behind them, several windows in the admin building shattered. McAleer could hear high-pitched native cursing amid the sharp crackling and tinkling sounds of breaking glass. *There goes that big window, among other things,* the priest told himself. *Hope no one's hurt.*

Carefully, McAleer raised his head, to see Zweebl already up and heading at his best speed for where the pilot lay sprawled on the tarmac. McAleer was quick to follow.

Puffing, McAleer reached Zweebl, already bent over the limp form of

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the pilot. Even at some distance, McAleer could feel the intense heat from the blazing ruin of the pilot's spacecraft. Opening his medikit, he took the probe and passed it closely over the pilot's still form, scanning for evidence of gross injury — about the limit of his ability with the thing. McAleer found nothing major — bumps and bruises, maybe a sprung shoulder, but no broken bones and no internal bleeding.

McAleer decided it would be better if he and Zweebl, rather than the Troof he could hear pattering toward them, moved the pilot away from the flaming wreck; Lord knew how the Troof might decide to do it. Drag the pilot behind a cart, maybe; not only were they largely ignorant of human physiology, but they were also pretty mad. At least McAleer would be careful of the pilot's neck; the Troof, having none, might not be.

Carefully, McAleer straightened out the pilot's body. *Out cold,* he thought. *How deeply, I don't know. I can't see inside the helmet, and there's no readout panel on the suit.* "Zweebl, we'd better try to get him out of this thing," he said. "We're going to have to move him. Don't let his head drop as I remove the helmet."

"Right, Father." Zweebl looked very serious.

McAleer undid the hasps that held the helmet to the suit, and gently eased it away.

"I'll be," the priest breathed. "It's a woman."

"A what?"

"A woman. A female human."

"Oh. Like Virgin Mary? Eve of Adam story, stolen rib?"

"Um, yes, sort of. A woman."

"You sure?" Zweebl asked. He peered. "Never saw one before. Her head just as round as yours. Can't tell difference."

"Well, I can. And she's alive. Just unconscious."

"Can tell *that.*"

"Better get me some water. No, wait. Ask one of them." McAleer pointed. A gaggle of Troof was running toward them; the priest thought he recognized Klatho in the lead, looking as angry as any Troof could. It was hard for McAleer to tell, even after some practice.

Zweebl chattered and squeaked at Klatho and the others in their native tongue. Klatho made a surprisingly puzzled, almost skeptical, response. Zweebl responded insistently. Finally, two of Klatho's co-workers headed back to the admin building.

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"Taken care of," Zweebl told McAleer. "Water be here soon."

"Was there a problem?"

"Not one damn bit. Oops, sorry again. To continue. Also asked for human-size pallet — um, *stretcher* — to move woman pilot. Never mind taking off suit now. Presume you want to get away from big fiery mess?"

"You presume correctly," McAleer said. "In fact, why don't we try to move her without the stretcher? She's not very big, although the suit weighs. I'd like to get her behind the building, just in case that ship has another surprise in store for us."

"Better pray it doesn't," Zweebl said. "I take feet; you take head?"

"Right. Try not to jiggle her around too much. Uh, just let me unhook the backpack first." The straps of the heavy pack unbuckled easily; it dropped away.

The weight of the woman and the suit was just within the ability of McAleer and Zweebl to cope. The priest noted with some anger that none of the admin-building personnel had made a move to assist them. McAleer fumed silently, but said nothing; it was now as it ever had been, ever since the priest arrived on Henderson. It was a few hundred difficult feet back to the rear of the admin building, and Zweebl moved even more slowly than the old priest, but they made it.

The handle controlling the roof of the gevster was starboard amidships, just within reach of McAleer's foot. He tromped on the handle, and the roof rose, squealing on its hinges. McAleer and Zweebl carefully placed the still unconscious pilot in the rear seat; Zweebl strapped her in.

"Hey!" came a high-pitched cry. "Zweebl! You wanted water? Got some. Can't find stretcher. Probably got swiped by ilantha con artist."

Zweebl grew even purpler with anger. McAleer saw Klatho coming toward them from the admin building, a standard-issue canteen in hand. Zweebl looked at McAleer inquiringly; the priest nodded.

"Bring, already, fool," called Zweebl. "Time wasting."

Klatho shrugged, uncaring. "Sorry. Had to send others to fight big fire caused by priest's compatriot. Remember?" He had the air of one pointing out the obvious to a simpleton. "Don't suppose you two want to assist in fierce battle, maybe?"

Zweebl flared. "As much as *you* assist *us* in heroic feat of dragging woman off field, incompetent!"

"Woman? What that?"

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"Hah! Uneducated ass!"

McAleer held up a hand. "Thank you for the water, Klatho," he said mildly, taking the canteen. "Zweebl, is there a cloth of some sort in the car?"

Zweebl gave a quick look. "Nope. Tissues in box, though, under seat." He fetched them.

"Thank you." McAleer took several and wet them, then began wiping the pilot's face. She stirred after a moment; her eyes fluttered, then opened.

"Made it?" she softly asked. "Made it?"

McAleer nodded. "Yes, yes," he said kindly and slowly, so she would understand. "You made it. You're safe on Henderson. We'll help you."

The woman sighed something — whether acknowledgment or relief or both, McAleer couldn't tell. Her eyes closed again; her body relaxed as she drifted off.

"You're driving, Zweebl," McAleer said as he settled himself in the back. He wet some more of the tissues with what was left in the canteen and began wiping the woman's face again; she didn't stir at the touch of the cool water, nor did the sound of Zweebl starting the turbines seem to disturb her.

"Hey!" Klatho squealed above the roar. "When I going to get canteen back, huh?"

"Soon," McAleer answered calmly.

"Hell with that," Klatho retorted. "Want it back *now*."

"Drive, Zweebl," McAleer said firmly, and they were off, with Klatho squeaking odd unheard curses behind them.

It was Sabbath night now. McAleer was spending it comfortably enough in the visitors' chair in his study; the pilot — DANEY, EDITH MANUS, according to her necktags — was sleeping in his room. She had roused several times, but only briefly, since McAleer and Zweebl had gotten her back to the residence. A more careful scan by McAleer upon their return had shown that Edith had suffered no concussion or other head injury; he judged that she was simply exhausted.

McAleer and Zweebl had spent most of an evil hour getting the rest of her spacesuit off, an hour during which Edith roused only once. McAleer had taken on the job of taking out Edith's urinary catheter and dumping the honey bag; he noticed some evidence of irritation and applied the appropriate medication. With Zweebl's assistance, McAleer also gave Edith a washrag bath, which she sorely needed; the priest estimated she'd

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been in the suit for a week, perhaps longer. He'd also had to treat an outbreak of severe dermatitis on Edith's back, buttocks, and limbs. Edith's suit, which stank abominably of sweat and waste, was airing out in the mission courtyard.

McAleer was awakened by a sound from his bedroom door. The handle rattled as it was opened. "Hello," came a voice.

McAleer rose. "Hello there, Miss Daney. Please come in." He waved the study lights on.

Edith Daney entered the room, clad in a pair of McAleer's pajamas. They fit poorly; Edith stood a foot shorter than McAleer and was compactly built. Her face was still swollen with sleep; her close-cropped black hair was sticking up in spikes randomly.

Nevertheless, when she smiled at McAleer, she glowed. "I really don't know where I am," she said. "On Henderson, I hope."

McAleer smiled back. "Yes, you are. I'm Mort McAleer. You're at St. Polycarp's mission. We're on the outskirts of the town closest to the field."

"You picked me up?" Edith asked. "How's my ship?"

"I'm afraid it's a dead loss."

Edith sighed, frowning. "Poor old girl. I hope she didn't hurt much. Um, I'm afraid I don't remember anything about the landing."

"It was good enough. You're here, after all."

Edith smiled slightly. "I guess it was. Thanks for taking care of me, Mr. McAleer."

"No thanks necessary. Glad to help. How are you feeling?"

Edith considered it. "Some achy, kind of tired, but nothing too bad. Better than I have a right to. How long was I asleep?"

McAleer looked at the clock. "A bit more than twelve hours. Want some coffee? There's some ready."

"Coffee. What a wonderful idea. Yes, please."

"I hear voices," came a high-pitched voice from upstairs. Edith's eyebrows raised.

McAleer smiled, "That's Zweebl. He's my assistant." Walking to the doorway of the study, he said loudly, "Come on down if you want to, Zweebl. Our patient's awake and feeling fine."

"Be down in flash, Father."

"'Father'?" Edith said. "Oops. But of course — you said this was a mission. Called you 'mister' before, didn't I? Sorry. I'm still a little slow, I guess—"

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McAleer laughed. "Miss Daney—"

"Edith."

"Edith, don't worry about it. It's not important. O.K.?"

Edith smiled. "Thanks. Now, where's the coffee?"

"Kitchen. I'll get it."

"I'll help."

After two quick cups of McAleer's coffee, both the pilot and the priest felt a great deal more human. Zweebl, content with a cup of *suffra* milk cut with water, sat quietly and listened to their conversation.

For his part, McAleer was fascinated. He'd already found out that Edith Manus Daney had been born Presbyterian but hadn't been a churchgoer since her early teens, and that she'd also been born Manus; she'd ditched Daney in an uncontested divorce action three years before.

McAleer also found out Edith was a small-time smuggler. Edith told that to McAleer only after she decided she could trust him. It hadn't taken long, though.

"Smuggling?" McAleer asked, surprised. "Really?"

"Sure," Edith shrugged. "I had to make a living. I went partners with the guy I took up with about a year after the divorce. Jimmy, his name was; he had the ship when I met him. Drugs, weapons, furs, gems, liquor, electronics, luxury foods — you name it; we brought it in." Edith paused. "Jimmy got killed on some piece of shit called Matter of Fact a year and a half ago. Some bastard took him down in a bar for no damn reason at all. I went solo after that."

McAleer nodded.

"The stuff I had aboard was bound for Conrad; somewhere along the way, my exchanger fused and the backups failed. She was an old ship; Jimmy was forever trying to hold her together, and I wasn't as good at maintenance as Jimmy was. Anyway, after she went bad on me, I came out of warp and spent eight days solid trying to get here, environmental controls gone and the ship in near vacuum all the way. Didn't get more than ten or fifteen minutes of sleep at a time. Best damned flying I ever did; you'll pardon me. Um, I hope you don't consider smuggling a sin or something."

McAleer thought about it, running a hand through what was left of his hair. "Render unto Caesar, you know. But I'm no judge."

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"Someone comes up with a planet full of sentients, and off we go, if we're able."

"Going to turn me in?" Edith asked calmly.

"No. No one's been hurt. No crime was committed in my presence. I'm not a cop, either. Look, Edith, I've got enough problems without turning informer. I don't care what you had aboard. Tell you the truth, I'm relieved I don't have to deal with the situation."

"Thanks. That's honest." Edith paused again, more comfortable now. "Well," she finally said, "enough about me. What about you?" She sipped at her coffee.

McAleer gave her a small, sad smile. "It's a pretty short story. I don't know how much you know about Henderson—"

"Zero. It was here when I needed it, that's all."

"O.K. Actually, there's not much to tell," McAleer began. "Henderson was first charted fifteen years ago. The exploration team stayed for a while, but didn't do much except introduce the Troof to the Fed; that's when Standard was introduced here.

"Anyway, the team left after a few months. There was really nothing here for it to chart, and its report was buried under a mass of explorers' reports from likelier star systems. Henderson doesn't have much in the way of natural resources, and it's not in a good location for easy exploitation. Its best, and pretty much only, value is as a way station on an unpopular trade route. In fact, no one came back here until the Feds opened a trading post in town about three years ago. That's when the field you landed on was built, by the way."

Edith nodded. "So what happened to the traders?"

McAleer shrugged. "It turned out that the Troof had no interest in trade with the Fed, so the post was closed down a year or so back. All the Troof got out of the deal was the field, and six months ago, me. The traders' final report managed not to get itself buried in the bureaucracy, and my bishop transferred me here right after a summary hit his desk."

"Just like that?"

"Sure. That's the way it works, Edith. Someone comes up with a planet full of sentients, and off we go, if we're able. My bishop's rather determined on the subject, so we're most often able. Representatives of other Terran

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sects will almost certainly come fairly soon, but, as of now, I'm the only human — the only *other* human — on Henderson. And I've done damned little with my, uh, monopoly."

"I once work for explorers and trade team," Zweebl put in. "Was go-between with my people for Feds back then. That how I know Terrans so good. Father Mort show up with no idea of what to do here. He hire me right away. Found this building for him, hired labor for reconstruct, et cetera. Showed him the ropes according to Hoyle."

"Zweebl taught me a lot about the Troof," McAleer said. He sighed. "Apparently not enough, though. I'm afraid my efforts here have been rather fruitless."

Edith looked puzzled.

"I mean, the mission is far from successful," McAleer continued. "I have no Troof congregants, none at all. I don't have anyone taking instruction in the faith, either. I realized that the Troof might not take to Orthodox Catholicism, but I haven't even had so much as an inquiry about it. No one's seemed in the least interested, not even Zweebl. He just works for me, that's all."

"Perhaps the native religion is too strong?" Edith hazarded.

"Is none," Zweeble stated flatly. "Didn't have one before Father Mort come. Still don't. New thing for us. Planets, stars in sky, fish in sea, mystery of Creation. Jesus dies, redeems Terra. Who cares? Phooey. Eat, drink, be merry, for tomorrow we do it all over again — that what I say."

Edith looked at Zweebl. "The Troof aren't religious? Isn't that supposed to be unusual for a sentient race?"

"How I know?" Zweebl asked, eyes wide. "Only know two such, and from what I see, it fifty-fifty."

"That's my assistant talking," McAleer said agreeably, "and, yes, the lack of any native religion here is highly unusual — unprecedented, I'd say. Not only are the Troof uninterested in my religion, but they don't have any use for *anything* I have to offer — my medical skills, agricultural knowledge, or anything else. I'm stalled, and have been since I arrived here."

"But isn't there anything else you can do?"

McAleer sighed. He rubbed his eyes tiredly. "If there is, I can't see it. Look, Edith, I've been a missionary all my adult life. Henderson is my third post. I founded missions on two other planets, got them going, and passed

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them on to ordained native assistants after a few years. All still exist; all are still successful. But on Henderson, I'm a total flop. No one here is interested in anything I might have to say. Even Zweebl is here only for the pay."

"You got it," Zweebl chirped.

McAleer shrugged. "Anyway, I'm not sure I can take this state of affairs for much longer. I might just give up."

"Hmmm," Edith said. "I'm not sure — no, nothing."

"What is it?"

"Well . . . I'm not sure I'm in favor of the mission thing, Father. I mean, why not leave the natives alone? I don't want to seem ungrateful, but—"

"No, it's a good question," McAleer said. He sighed. "The basic reason, which you can accept or not, is that every being has a soul to save."

"And it's up to Terrans to save them?"

"Basically speaking, yes. Orthodox Catholic Terrans and their ordained converts, that is."

Edith was unconvinced. "Oh. Well, that's a little too dogmatic for me."

McAleer waved a hand. "Look, Edith, we don't threaten anyone with Hell; we don't even preach much. We lead by example. We're trained to heal, to teach, to *care*. It does some good in the universe, or should. But I haven't contributed a damned thing to anyone's physical or spiritual well-being here on Henderson, and I'm very tired of that."

"More coffee?" asked Zweebl politely.

Two weeks later a stronger and more rested Edith had already taken to long walks along the narrow streets of Trooftown, something McAleer did only occasionally. A ship might or might not call at the field within the year. Until then, Edith Manus Daney — broke, jobless, and with no prospects in sight other than the pallid ones afforded by St. Polycarp's — was determined to do what she could to survive in as much style as she could manage on a backwater planet such as Henderson.

It also bothered Edith that she owed McAleer rather a large debt, and she could see no way to pay it off. He hadn't quite saved her life, but he *had* done much to heal her and make her feel at home. What could she do? She'd have slept with him willingly — she'd gone to bed with worse and for less — but McAleer was a professed celibate and seemed to take his vows seriously. Edith respected McAleer for that and didn't press the

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issue, but it made her problem that much tougher to solve.

Edith did not have it in her to sponge off McAleer indefinitely. Edith hated owing anyone. Cash-and-carry; that was Edith.

Worry about it later, she told herself. Right now, it was a beautiful morning, and Market Day — held every four days, or twice a week, as the Troof reckoned time — was already well under way. Edith had quickly found that she loved the smaller bazaar held on the other days of the Troof week, and the way the Troof dickered with each other over even the most minor transactions. The action on Market Days was even better. Watching two blue, bulbous, and excited Troof gesturing frantically and shrieking at each other in the spirit of hard bargaining was one of those sights in life Edith was glad she hadn't missed.

To her great surprise, Edith had found on her first day out that the Troof seemed to be incredibly interested in her. She would have thought that, given McAleer's experience, she would have evoked no more than a yawn from the jaundiced natives — but, instead, they approached her in friendship and made constant inquiries about her health. Edith thought it impolitic to mention any of this to McAleer — at least until she found out the reason behind it.

Today was no different. Edith had been approached and greeted warmly by several Troof on her way to the square. *Is it because I'm a woman?* she wondered. *Maybe. They've never seen one before, after all; the exploration team years ago, and then the traders — they were all males, according to Father Mort. How boring! Damn all sexists, anyway. Or is it because of the way I arrived here — the crash? No, that doesn't make any sense.*

Edith strolled through the town square. Market Day was indeed in full swing. Scores of merchants lined the perimeter of the square, their wares neatly placed on large, multicolored rugs laid on the stone plaza. A few merchants had crude but neat wooden booths set up in an open rectangle around the center of the square. Hundreds of Troof milled about, and here and there squeaky cries of outrage could be heard as buyers and sellers attempted to strike deals.

Edith headed for her "favorite" booth, Haraska's. Haraska sold agricultural products grown on a farm he owned at some distance from town, and seemed to do well at it. The smell of the booth reminded Edith of a vegetable stand in the neighborhood where she grew up, so she liked hanging around it. Haraska was also popular with the other merchants;

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there were usually a few standing around talking to Haraska between sales.

"Hey, Edith!" came Haraska's voice. "Over here today. Visit?" Edith looked around and spotted Haraska, waving; there were two other Troof with him at his booth. She smiled at Haraska and headed over.

"How are you feeling?" Haraska asked. "Better?"

"Yes. Almost well. And you?"

"Fine. Business good. Sun shine. Big crowd. Excellent day."

"Glad to hear it." Edith looked at the two Troof merchants standing around Haraska's booth. "Hi, everyone."

"Hello!" one of them squeaked. "I Redefe, this Eudobo. How your health?"

"I feel much better, thank you. Glad to meet you all."

"Same here," piped Redefe and Eudobo.

"So what new?" Haraska asked Edith. "Enjoying beautiful weather?"

"Yes, very much," Edith replied. "Actually, I *am* looking for something today—"

"Oh?" said all three Troof, their eyes a bit wider.

"Well," Edith continued, "it's more in the nature of advice. I'm going to need a place to stay, now that I'm up and around again. I can't stay at the mission. Do you have any ideas?"

The three Troof grew very excited. "Hah! *Yerega!* Knew it! She *no ilantha*, not nearly!"

"Had feeling all along," said Redefe. "Definitely *yerega*."

Edith was puzzled.

"This good news," Eudobo said. "First Terran *yerega* we ever meet. Good stuff. Yes, can find you place easily, even one conforming to needs of larger Terran dimension. I talk to friend about it. No problem. There will be rent, but you can owe."

"Well, that sounds fine," Edith said. "Thank you."

Eudobo shrugged. "Pleasure. I find friend now. You want place today?"

They certainly move fast around here, Edith thought. "Tomorrow or the next day will be all right, thanks. I have some things to gather."

"Copacetic," agreed Eudobo. "Bye now." He wobbled off.

"I go with," Redefe said. "Bye."

As the two Troof headed away from the square, Edith turned to Haraska. "Mind answering a couple of questions, my friend?"

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"'Course not. Gimme."

"Just what does *yerega* mean? And that other word — *ilantha*?"

Haraska looked surprised; his small mouth made an O. "You not know?"

"No, I don't. I'm new here."

Haraska considered that. "Yes, it true! You would not ask if you knew. You are, perhaps, *yerega* by birth! Oh! the marvels of Terra!" He seemed quite excited by the thought.

"So what is *yerega*?" Edith asked again.

"Most important things, friend Edith," the Troof replied. "Difference between *yerega, ilantha* vital. You *yerega*, which is better, as I am and Eudobo Redefe are."

"You mean that there are two kinds of Troof? One *yerega*, one *ilantha*?"

Haraska shook his head. "No. Only one kind of Troof. Two kinds of —how you say, attitude? Belief?"

Edith was puzzled. "You mean religion?"

"Ah, that it. Religion. Worship, living life by code. You see?"

"I *do* see, but Father McAleer said you *have* no religion —"

Haraska gestured impatiently. "No, no. Of course he say that. He *ilantha*."

"He is?"

"Certainly," Haraska said emphatically. "Self-evident. All Terrans *ilantha* before you come."

Edith thought about that. "So why am I different?"

Haraska told her — explaining it as if Edith were a child, which on Troof she was — and, gradually, Edith got it.

Edith hurried back to St. Polycarp's. She found McAleer in his study, behind his desk. He smiled at her as she entered.

"Hi," he said. "Enjoy yourself at the market?"

"Yes. Look, I've been talking to some of the Troof—"

"You have? You mean, besides Zweebl?"

"Of *course* I mean besides Zweebl!"

McAleer looked surprised. "Well, that's fine. I'm even a bit jealous—"

"Can I go on, please?" Edith broke in. "This is important."

"Please do."

Edith seated herself. "Ever hear the words *yerega* and *ilantha*?"

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"Here and there. The Troof seem to use them to cuss and fume at each other."

"Well, they're not curses. They're the names of sects. Religious sects."

McAleer's eyes widened. "They can't be," he said. "There's no native religion here."

"There sure as hell is," Edith returned. "In fact, in this small area there are two. One's pretty big, and one's fairly small — but both are active and vital, and everyone's a true believer in one or the other. No agnostics or atheists here."

"But Zweebl says—"

"Zweebl is *ilantha*," Edith said flatly.

McAleer blinked. "All right. So what's *ilantha*?"

Edith paused. "An *ilantha* lies."

"He tells lies? That's it?"

Edith nodded. "It's important. He lies *constantly*. He lies anytime he can possibly get away with it. That's all the time, nearly enough. All *ilantha* do it. Oh, if you ask one what color the sky is, he'll tell you it's green because you can check on that too easily. But if he can lie with any possibility of getting away with it, he will. Without fail."

McAleer shook his head. "But *why*? It doesn't make sense."

"Yes, it does. You don't know enough yet. There's also this: the other group, the *yerega*, is just the opposite. They always tell the truth. All the merchants in the town square are *yerega*; the Troof wouldn't have it any other way. *Ilantha* are, generally speaking, farmers, ranchers, and hunters. It doesn't matter if you lie a lot, if you can produce crops and game."

"I don't get it, I'm afraid," McAleer said. "How did all this come about?"

"It's the religion, Father," Edith answered. "It makes a certain kind of sense, actually. The *yerega* believe that telling the truth shames the Devil — it's not the Devil, really, but the idea is close enough — while the *ilantha* believe that telling lies misleads him. Both sects take it all *very* seriously."

"So Zweebl is *ilantha*," McAleer said. "All right. But I still don't see why that's important, or what that has to do with me."

"You're *ilantha* by association, Father," Edith said. "*You hired Zweebl!* You were neutral as a newborn Troof babe when you arrived here, but hiring Zweebl — as your assistant, no less — put you over the line."

McAleer's jaw dropped. "Oh! That means the Troof think I'm a total liar!"

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"Right. And here you are, trying to tell them about Orthodox Catholicism — and no one's having any of it. Why *should* they? You're *ilantha! Anything* you say is a lie. To the Troof — *yerega* and *ilantha* both — everything you are represents a falsehood. Of *course* they haven't been paying any attention to you — from their point of view, you're trying to make them into stooges, *yerega* and *ilantha* both!"

"So I'm guilty by association," McAleer breathed. "I'll be damned. But wait — you're living here. How come you haven't been tarred with the same brush? Why aren't you considered, er, *ilantha!*"

Edith smiled. "I just got here, and I've been sick, remember? To the Troof, that's O.K. I hadn't yet chosen a path — but I did today, without knowing it."

"How?"

"I told a Troof friend of mine — a *yerega,* as I soon found out — that I was looking for a place to live."

"And that was it?"

Edith grinned. "It was more than enough. Every day I've been out, each Troof I've met has asked me how my health was. I thought they were being polite, but it wasn't that. They were waiting for me to choose which path I'd walk — something I wouldn't be expected to do until I felt completely well. In fact, I managed to impress my pals in the square by choosing anyway, before I had to."

"Just by saying you intended to move out of the mission?"

"Sure. You see, while I was ill, I had no choice in where I was living, any more than a child does. I incurred no, er, penalty for living under the same roof as a couple of *ilantha.* There's plenty of precedent for that. However, once I could choose, I chose to get out — and that automatically made me *yerega.* An honest woman." Edith smiled at that. "They're finding me a place now."

McAleer nodded. "I think I see. I take it the explorers and traders who used to be here were also considered *ilantha!*"

"Yes. Zweebl worked for them, too, pretty much doing what he does for you. Since the exploration team and traders were *ilantha* because they had 'adopted' Zweebl, no one would trade with them; the Troof of either sect were sure they'd be cheated. The *yerega* Troof wouldn't even speak to the Terrans unless it was an emergency. For their part, the *ilantha* Troof didn't think talking to a bunch of Terrans stupid enough to employ one of their own was worth their time."

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Edith scratched her head. "Every survey report on Troof sociology that's ever been made is going to have to be rewritten. I'm the only Terran the Troof have ever met who wasn't *ilantha* . . . and that means I'm the only Terran who's ever been able to talk to the *yerega* Troof and find out what's really been going on here."

McAleer nodded, then sighed. "Well, I guess congratulations are in order. If my church allowed women to become priests, I'd let you run the mission. I've really made a mess of things, haven't I?"

Edith frowned. "You didn't know anything about this," she said. "How can you blame yourself? You're not being fair. Even blaming Zweebl is out of line — from his point of view, he's being devout."

"I suppose he is," McAleer agreed. "Look, I'm glad that you found out what's wrong here. I really do wish you'd gotten here a year ago; maybe I could have fixed things then. Now, though, the situation seems irredeemable."

Edith smiled a secret smile. "Now, really, Father — you run a mission, don't you?"

McAleer shrugged. "Of course."

"Well, then — does the word *conversion* ring a bell?"

McAleer blinked. After a moment he smiled.

THE SITE of McAleer's conversion was a large hall near the square in the middle of Trooftown. McAleer had never been inside before; Zweebl had told him it was a warehouse, and McAleer had no reason to doubt him. Actually, the hall was the nearest thing to a church the *yerega* Troof had — more like a Quaker meetinghouse in spirit, something like a theater in fact.

The priest's imminent conversion from one sect to another had aroused great interest among the Troof. Conversions were rare enough, and provided a reason for splendid spectacle and feasting for both sects. The *yerega* Troof were genuinely happy about McAleer's conversion; the *ilantha* Troof only pretended to be.

McAleer just hoped he could get through the ceremony without incident. His sponsor was the merchant Haraska, who was serving in that role as a favor to Edith. (Edith wondered how she would pay *that* one back, too.) There had already been a hour's worth of Troof hymn-singing, and McAleer had anointed the stubby blue feet of the *yerega* leader, Sethaber,

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with *fasgat* oil to prove his humility and sincerity.

But there would be a test, too. Haraska had warned him that there would be one near the close of the ceremony, but would not say what it was, other than to say it would not be physical. McAleer wasn't worried; he was determined to tell the absolute truth about anything, no matter what. That, he thought, would see him through.

It was really too bad that the test had nothing to do with McAleer telling the truth.

When the time for the test finally came, Sethaber stabbed a stubby finger at random toward three Troof sitting in different parts of the hall. They rose and waddled toward the front, stopping in front of McAleer. Edith, nearby, watched with great interest.

"I have chosen these three at random," Sethaber said. "I know none of them personally. The test, Father McAleer of Terra, is for you to tell me which is *yerega,* if any, and which is *ilantha,* if any. A true *yerega* has no guile and will be able to tell. A true answer will validate your conversion. You are allowed to question each one of these three only once. You may not question me or anyone else at all. Let the test proceed."

McAleer's mind was boggled. He knew what he had to do, but had no idea how to do it — and he couldn't afford to waste a question. He scratched his head and thought more furiously than he had ever thought in his entire life. *So much hangs on this,* he prayed. *Please, God. Just a little clue. Perhaps these people can sense each other's ethics, but I certainly can't!*

McAleer looked at each one of the three Troof closely. No, there was no way to tell a *yerega* from an *ilantha* by physical differences. Neither sect wore identifiable clothing or markings; there was no analogue to religious medals among the Troof. McAleer also knew that he could not ask a question to which the answer was obvious; any *ilantha* among the three Troof would give a correct answer because it could be checked easily. If the answer could *not* be checked easily, it would do McAleer no good.

Could McAleer ask a question and rely on audience reaction to gauge the truthfulness of the answer? He decided he could not; the approach struck him as unreliable.

McAleer looked to where Edith was standing. She seemed worried, and there was no help there anyway.

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What if he simply *asked* — wait, wait! That was it!

Perhaps a minute had gone by. Sethaber didn't look at all impatient; good. So far, McAleer remained within the apparent bounds of propriety. He hoped his approach to the problem kept him there.

"You there, Number One," McAleer said, pointing. "Are you *yerega*, or are you *ilantha*?"

The Troof opened his mouth to speak. "No!" shouted McAleer. "Don't tell me. Whisper the answer to Number Two."

Sethaber stirred. "The question is valid, but whispering the answer to another does not change the rules of the test. You have used up your question to Number One."

"I understand that, Sethaber," McAleer said. "May I continue?"

Sethaber motioned to McAleer to proceed.

"Number Two," McAleer called out. "Tell me what Number One said, and whether you think he was telling you the truth."

Number Two squeaked loudly in outrage. "He tell me he *yerega*, but he not! He lie! He *ilantha*! I am *yerega*! I tell you truth!"

Number Three, unbidden, broke in. "Nah! They both *ilantha*. They both lie to foul up test! I the only *yerega* here! Believe that! I not lie!"

McAleer turned to Sethaber. "I have your answer, Sethaber. Number One is *ilantha*. Number Two is *yerega*. Number Three is *ilantha*."

"You are correct," Sethaber said. "Welcome, *yerega*."

The sincere, happy squeaking of the *yerega* Troof merged into a high-pitched roar of mass approval.

McAleer went over to Edith and hugged her. "I almost feel bar mitzvahed," he said.

"Congratulations, *yerega*," Edith said, returning the hug.

Later that night, after the feasting was over, McAleer and Edith shared another pot of coffee. McAleer had made it himself, because Zweebl was gone now; the little Troof refused to stay in the employ of a *yerega*, nor could McAleer continue to keep an *ilantha* at the mission. That didn't stop McAleer from missing Zweebl already.

"I admire your restraint," McAleer said to Edith after their first cup.

"In what way?" Edith said. "There *are* a couple of restraints on me, you know."

"I meant only that it's been hours, and you haven't yet asked how I did it."

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"I thought you made a lucky guess, and that you asked the questions to stall for time."

"Nope," McAleer said, grinning. "I almost did something like that, but then I realized that, within the rules, there *was* a way to figure out who was who. So I used it."

"With those questions?" Edith looked puzzled. "But how could you know who was telling the truth and who wasn't? You didn't even hear the answer that Number One gave — unless you read his lips or something?"

"I didn't have to." McAleer sipped at his second cup of coffee. "Figure it out for yourself. If Number One were *yerega*, what would he have said in answer to my first question?"

"That he was *yerega*, of course. He would have had to tell the truth."

"And if he were *ilantha*?"

"He would have — he would have lied!" Edith grinned in surprise. "He would have *had* to say *yerega*! So you knew what Number One's answer was, all along!"

"That's right," McAleer said. "Then I asked Number Two the second question. Since Number Two told the truth about what Number One had whispered to him, I knew he was *yerega* right off, and anything else he'd say would be the truth, too. Number Two told me that Number One was *ilantha*, and I could believe it. Then Number Three burst out in mock indignation and said both of the others were liars, which I knew wasn't true. That made Number Three *ilantha*. Actually, I think I scored some extra points by having to ask only two questions, but it's just a feeling."

"Hmmm," Edith mused. "Well, congratulations. I must admit that your solution to the problem was pretty goddamn elegant, if you'll pardon me."

"Forgiven." McAleer smiled broadly. "And here's a little bonus to end the day. Now that I'm *yerega*, anything I say is the truth. Think of what that means to a missionary on a planet full of skeptics!"

Edith stirred her coffee. "I'm glad you're pleased. I'm not sure I am, though. Does that mean the Troof are all going to become Orthodox Catholics?"

McAleer shrugged, still smiling. "No, it doesn't. It just means I'm going to get a chance to make my pitch, that's all. Just because I tell only the truth doesn't mean I tell the only truth there is."

"I think I followed that," Edith said.

* * *

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Several months later another ship arrived, a landing boat from a much larger craft orbiting Henderson. McAleer gave himself an hour off and left his busy, bustling mission to meet it. The gevster did its usual noisy job of transporting him to the field; his new assistant, a *yerega* named Ghrosset, accompanied McAleer and cursed at the machine as much as Zweebl ever had.

There was quite a crowd of Troof at the field. McAleer thought it was too bad that Edith wasn't in town for the landing, but she was a few thousand miles away on a survey job; the Fed had hired her to correct previous reports and come up with new data of her own. She led a skilled team of *yerega* Troof and was much too happy at her work to leave Henderson. McAleer was glad about that; he would miss her terribly if she left.

"Hey, Father!" came a cry. "Welcome to field!"

McAleer spotted Klatho, the field superintendent, coming toward him. The priest greeted him warmly. "Good to see you again," he said. "Any word on who's aboard?"

"No VIPs," Klatho answered. "Charter flight, though. No passenger list broadcast. My boys handle landing O.K. I come to watch. This first craft to land here since Edith crash, you know. Very big deal."

"I know," McAleer said. "I wonder who's aboard?"

The boat settled softly onto the field; its engines died. Several Troof quickly rolled a gangway up to the forward port air lock.

A tall, thin, unsmiling man in clerical garb emerged.

"Hey, that guy dressed like you," Klatho said. "Another priest?"

"Seems to be," McAleer said. "In fact, he's got 'missionary' written all over him."

"Yeah? Where?"

"Just an expression. I'd better meet him, Klatho."

McAleer walked to the foot of the gangway, extending his hand. "Welcome to Henderson. I'm Mort McAleer."

The cleric frowned. "Oh. The competition." He shook hands limply. "I'm Harold Smith. Lutheran, in case you were curious."

"Well, to tell you the truth, I was. I'm Orthodox Catholic myself."

"I know," Smith said unpleasantly. "I read our report, thank you. You've been dealing with these Troof for a while, haven't you?"

"Just about a year now. I think you'll find them pleasant people."

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The two began walking toward the admin building. Suddenly, McAleer spotted Zweebl emerging from the crowd.

"Here comes someone I know," McAleer said. "His name is Zweebl—"

"'Zweebl'? What kind of name is that? Haven't you managed to persuade any of these aliens to adopt good, Christian names?"

"I suppose not." McAleer fell silent.

"Well, that'll change," Smith said firmly as Zweebl reached them. The crowd of Troof watched.

"Greetings," the little native said to the newcomer. "I am Zweebl, experienced in serving all sorts of Terran needs. Have worked for Fed exploration party, Fed trade group. Can I be of service?"

"Depends," said Smith. "You know anything about mission work?"

"Could learn. I quick study."

Smith considered it. To McAleer, he said, "You know this Troof?"

"I haven't seen him in some months," McAleer said carefully, "but his fellows speak well of him. They say he's a hard worker."

"Hmmmm." Smith scratched his chin. "At least it speaks decent Standard. O.K." Smith stooped to address Zweebl. "You're hired, on a temporary basis. I won't pay you much; the main rewards of the job will be spiritual. You understand?"

Zweebl nodded. "Deal. Shake hands, Terran fashion?"

"Why not?" Smith returned. They shook.

The crowd saw the handshake and melted away.

McAleer hid a shameful smile and headed for the boat. There might be some mail aboard for him.

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

THE UNFORGIVING MINUTE

WHEN I was young, I encountered, as most avidly reading youngsters did, inspirational writings of many kinds. I did not fail, for instance, to come across *If*, written in 1910 by Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936).

I read it with cynicism, I'm afraid. Young as I was on the day I stumbled across it, I knew that I couldn't live by its precepts. I doubted that anyone could.

There were the lines that went, "If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster / And treat those two imposters just the same—"

I knew I wouldn't. I knew I would jump up and down and wave my arms with glee in case of Triumph. I knew even more firmly that I would sulk in a corner and be very sorry for myself in case of Disaster.

What's more, I thought, even as a child, that anyone who would make "one heap of all your winnings / And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss" was a jackass.

There was one bit that got me, however, that I kept repeating to myself over and over. It was the following:

If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And — which is more — you'll be a Man, my son!

I won't say that those lines centrally guided my life, because there were a number of other factors that made me keep the old nose to the grindstone day after day and year after year; but if at any time I thought, "Well, why not take it easy?" it was Kipling's "unforgiving minute" that popped into my mind, the minute that would never forgive being wasted and would never return, and it was that which turned

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me back and forced me to give it my sixty seconds worth of distance run.

So it came about that once an interviewer asked me if I had a fixed routine before starting work.

"What do you mean, a fixed routine?" I asked, puzzled.

"Well, do you start out by sharpening pencils, or by looking out the window, or by doing deep-knee bends, or anything else that would serve to get you into the mood of writing?"

"Oh, *that*," I said. "Sure! I have something I never fail to do before I start working."

"Good! Tell me what it is!"

"The first thing I do," I said, "is get close enough to the typewriter for my fingers to reach the keys."

So let's talk about the unforgiving minute.

The time units that forced themselves on human beings to begin with were the three that depended on astronomical facts: the day, the month, and the year. I have devoted essays to each of these three natural units of time, the most recent being TIME IS OUT OF JOINT (February 1986), which dealt with the day.

Even the day, which is the shortest of the three, is quite long; and it was unavoidable that human beings would divide it into smaller portions: dawn, sunrise, morning, noon, afternoon, sunset, twilight, and, of course, night.

These are not precise divisions, but they are sufficient for many purposes.

There are occasions, however, when you might want something more precise. You might want to make sure you finished a job before the heat of the afternoon made you stop, or that you began a journey to the next town with the secure knowledge you would not be overtaken by nightfall. For those reasons, you might want a pretty close idea as to just what time of day it was.

We don't know who first thought of following the shadow of a stick as it crept along the ground in response to the fact that the Sun was making its way across the sky. Such "sundials", however, came into use in early civilized time in Egypt, and the path of the shadow was divided into 12 equal periods.

Why 12? Probably because the astronomic periods suggested the number. After all, there are about 12 months to the year; about 60 days (12 X 5) in two months; and about 360 (12 X 30) in a year.

Why those numbers? Early civilized humanity had plenty of trouble handling fractions, and it so happened that 12 could be divided evenly by 2, 3, 4, and 6 — no frac-

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tions. No other number close to that size could be divided evenly by as many as four different factors.

As for 60, that could be divided evenly by 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 10, 12, 15, 20, and 30: while 360 could be divided evenly by 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 12, 15, 18, 20, 24, 30, 36, 45, 60, 72, 90, 120 and 180. These were unique numbers made to be easily handled — as anyone could plainly see — by the all-wise gods.

So the Sumerians divided the circle into 360 equal parts (which we call "degrees" from the Latin word meaning "to step down"). Each degree was divided into 60 equal parts, and each of those parts into 60 smaller equal parts. The first set was called, in Latin, "pars minuta prima" ("first small part") and the next set was called "pars minuta secunda" ("second small part"). These phrases were shortened to "minute" and "second" respectively.

Once the day was divided into 12 hours of daytime and 12 hours of night, it seemed natural to divide each hour into 60 minutes and each minute into 60 seconds. That is how the unforgiving minute got its start and why each one had to have its 60 seconds worth of distance run.

Naturally, minutes and seconds of time were just mathematicians' devices at first. You couldn't actually measure them. Sundials only sufficed to give you an estimate of rather sizeable fractions of hours. Furthermore, sundials worked only during the daytime and only when the sky was not clouded over.

Could there be some way of measuring time on cloudy days or by night making use of some device that could be checked against the sundial when that was possible?

What was needed for the purpose was some natural process that took place at a fixed speed over an extended period of time, and to standardize just how much of the process took place in exactly one hour by the sundial. You would then have a "clock." (The word is from the word for "bell" in most European languages, including medieval Latin, since the passage of each hour would be announced by the tolling of a bell.)

Thus, you could keep time by the burning of a candle made in a fixed size of fixed material, or by having dry sand drift from an upper chamber into a lower one through a narrow orifice. Such devices could work day and night, cloudy or clear, and they would be portable besides.

You could continue the timekeeping by substituting a new candle as the old one burned out, or by turning the sand clock over when all the sand had drifted out of the upper chamber. Still, these devices weren't very good. Different can-

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dles were bound to burn at different rates, and even the same candle burned more rapidly or less rapidly depending on such things as air currents. As for sand glasses, the sand drifted through the orifice more rapidly when there was a weight of much sand above it than when there was little sand there.

Perhaps the best clock the ancients had was the "clepsydra," in which it was water that dropped from an upper chamber to a lower one. The word clepsydra is from the Greek, meaning "to steal water," because the water seemed to be stolen slowly out of the upper chamber by the lower. It is just as useful, however, to call it a "water clock."

The earliest water clocks have been traced back to 1400 B.C. in ancient Egypt, but it was not until about 100 B.C. that a Greek engineer, Ctesibius, devised one with the obvious sources of error removed. He arranged for a continuous flow of water into the upper chamber, with an overflow. In this way the upper chamber always had the same head of water, and the rate of drip did not change with time.

Eventually, water clocks were fitted with little floats that supported pointers that rose with the water level in the lower chamber. The pointer thus automatically indicated the number of each hour as it passed.

* * *

However good a water clock might be, the use of water was an inconvenience. There had to be a continuous water supply; the clock was not easily portable; and however careful one was, leaks or spills ensured that there would always be wetness about.

Yet clocks were needed to a slowly increasing extent. In the Middle Ages, monks and others in the religious life had to engage in prayers at set times for the sake of discipline. It is easy to see that those who had to say their prayers under such conditions might grow to feel their souls were in danger, not only if they neglected to say them, but even if they were merely to say them at the wrong time.

People in houses of worship therefore had to have clocks, and they got rid of water and its inconveniences by making use of gravity instead. They wrapped a cord around a drive shaft and suspended a heavy weight from it. The weight, as it was pulled downward by gravity, forced the drive shaft to turn, and a pointer attached to it marked off the hours on a dial. The trick was to so arrange the workings that the pointer turned at a constant, slow speed that took it around the dial in twelve hours, or two complete turns in a day.

About 1300, something called

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an "escapement" was invented. This was a device with teeth that engaged the turning drive shaft and allowed it to move only so far. Then it disengaged and another tooth caught it. This helped the drive shaft turn slowly enough and constantly enough for the purpose.

Until medieval "gravity clocks" were invented, attempts were made to take into account the varying length of daytime as the seasons progressed, making the daytime hours longer in summer and shorter in winter. With the gravity clocks, however, this was abandoned. The hours were made a fixed length all year long, and it was agreed to let the Sun rise and set at different times by the clock through the year.

All clocks of ancient and medieval times, by the way, even at their very best, could be counted on to end the day at least a quarter of an hour fast or slow. They would have to be adjusted manually at frequent intervals by checking them against sundials.

This is not intended as a sneer, of course. A loss or gain of a quarter of an hour a day represents an error of just about one percent. Considering the level of technology then available, I think this small error speaks highly indeed for the ingenuity and for the pains taken by the early timekeepers.

What's more, prior to about 1600 there was little need for greater accuracy where ordinary people, even clerics, were involved. There were certain specialized activities, however, that *did* require better timekeeping, and it is to these we now must turn.

Until 1581, the regular motions human beings used for their clocks were progressive. Candles always burned downward; sand, water and weights always moved downward.

In 1581, however, the Italian scientist Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), who was only 17 at the time, discovered a regular motion that could be under the control of human beings and that went back and forth, that was *periodic*.

He was attending services at the Cathedral of Pisa, and he found himself watching a swinging chandelier that was shifting with air currents, now in a wide arc, now in a small one. It seemed to Galileo that whatever the size of the arc, the chandelier swung back and forth in equal times. He tested this by his pulsebeat and then, when he got home, experimented by suspending weight from strings and allowing them to swing in small arcs and in large ones. He thus discovered the principle of the "pendulum" (from a Latin word meaning "hanging" or "swinging").

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In principle, it was at once clear that a pendulum might be used to control the motions of a clock, but there were two things in the way. In the first place, the bob of a pendulum suspended from a string moves in a circular arc, and its period of oscillation is not *exactly* constant. A wider swing takes a *little* longer than a shorter swing. Secondly, left to itself, a pendulum gradually comes to a halt. How does one keep it going?

Galileo could not solve these problems. This was ironic for he made experimental science popular, and, in the work he did, time measurement was essential. Galileo was working with bodies rolling down inclined planes, and he had to time the distance they moved very precisely if he was to determine the laws that governed moving bodies. All he could do was to measure time by the drip of water or the beat of his pulse.

If the experimental scientists who followed Galileo in this new line of endeavor had had no better way of keeping time than Galileo had, science would have been stopped in its tracks. A decent understanding of the laws of nature, a reasonable description of the way in which the Universe works, simply must have some accurate measure of time.

Fortunately, in 1656, a Dutch physicist, Christiaan Huygens (1629-1695), turned the trick. He managed to make the pendulum swing between two curved guards that forced the bob to move in a type of arc called the "cycloid," in which case its period *was* constant. He also worked out methods for using the clock weights to transfer enough energy to the pendulum to keep it swinging indefinitely and for making the swinging pendulum control the escapement so that it became much more precise than before. (Of course, the descending weights had to be wound back to the top periodically just as they would have to be in the absence of a pendulum.)

Huygens "pendulum clock" was the first timepiece that was accurate not to the hour, but to the *minute*. For the first time, a timepiece could be profitably given another hand — a minute hand making a complete circle while the hour hand advanced one hour.

The big disadvantage of the pendulum clock was its size. The pendulum had to be a yard long to beat out seconds and, in general, the pendulum clock was non-portable.

The English physicist Robert Hooke (1635-1703) had, however, begun to study springs in 1658 and had showed that they could oscillate with constant periods, even as pendulums did, and took up less

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room in so doing.

In 1675, then, Huygens worked out a miniature clock. In this a stiff "mainspring" gradually uncoiled, supplying a steady force that kept a much thinner "hairspring" oscillating steadily. The hairspring kept the escapement going, and the clock thus produced was small enough to keep in a pocket.

Such a small clock was useful to sentries or other people who had to watch (that is, stay awake) during the night hours. The length of time they had to do so before being relieved was therefore "a watch"; and the instrument that told them when their watch was over and when relief should be coming was also a "watch."

Watches, too, had to be rewound periodically to recoil the mainspring. (Nature simply won't give you something for nothing.)

Navigation represented another timekeeping problem. On the open seas, there were no roads, no landmarks, no one to ask the way. One had to determine latitude and longitude. For latitude, it was only necessary to measure the maximum height of the Sun in the course of the day. Longitude, however, depended on the time difference between the moment of highest Sun at the home port and the moment of highest Sun at the position at sea.

Prior to 1400, longitude didn't matter, for ships only made short voyages, hopping from shore to shore. Even if they missed their goal, they would be sure to reach some piece of land and make a new try.

During the 1400's, however, Europeans began to make long ocean voyages that kept them out of touch of known land for weeks, or even months. The absence of timekeeping equipment forced them to guess at their longitude, and they could easily lose themselves in the trackless sea. Nations like England and the Netherlands began to depend, more and more, on world-wide commerce and could not afford to fool around with lost ships.

Pendulum clocks wouldn't do on board ship, since the swaying would put the pendulum out of action. Ordinary watches wouldn't do either, because they weren't accurate enough. What was needed was a "chronometer" (Greek for "time measurer") that was small enough to be portable, unaffected by the swaying of a ship, and very accurate over long periods of time.

In 1713, therefore, the British government offered a prize of 20,000 pounds (an enormous fortune in those days) to anyone inventing such a timepiece. A British mechanic, John Harrison (1693-1776), managed to turn the trick, constructing a chronometer that kept time to with-

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in one minute after five months at sea.

The "gentlemen" of Parliament, however, objected strongly to paying a fortune to a mere mechanic, and it took poor Harrison 40 years to collect his prize money. King George III actually had to interfere on Harrison's side to make Parliament disgorge.

Clocks and watches continued to improve and to take into account, for instance, changes in temperature. They proved essential for the workings of an industrial society. Train travel, air travel, radio and television all have to work on the minute, or even the second, if they are to work at all.

It came about, therefore, that almost everyone came to carry a timepiece in his pocket or on his wrist, and was constantly checking the time (at least, if he is as time-bound as I am). What this costs us all in endlessly being driven by each unforgiving minute — what it costs in terms of ulcers and heart attacks — I can't say, but there's nothing to be done about it.

Individuals might deliberately step back into a timeless "simple life" but science, industry, and society in general, simply cannot.

By 1950, the best mechanical clocks could keep such accurate time that they would gain or lose more than a second in 19 months, or less than a minute in an entire lifetime. It might seem silly to look for still more accurate methods of timekeeping, but greater accuracy was sought and found.

In 1880, a French chemist, Pierre Curie (1859-1906) and his brother Jacques, discovered the phenomenon of "piezoelectricity" (where "piezo-" comes from the Greek work meaing "to press").

They discovered that if certain crystals were placed under pressure they would develop an electric potential. That seemed mysterious, but we now know that crystals are built up of particles, some of which carry positive electric charges and some negatives. Under pressure, these charges are separated slightly, producing the potential.

The reverse is also true. If a crystal is placed under an electric potential, it compresses.

If a crystal is placed under an oscillating electric potential, it compresses and relaxes in rapid alternation, producing soundwaves equal in frequency to that of the potential oscillation. This means that a beam of ultrasonic vibrations (far too rapid to be heard) is formed and can be used for what we now call "sonar."

The tiny vibrations of the crystal are far more rapid, and far more regular, than the mechanical vibra-

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tions of pendulums and springs. What is needed, then, is a watch containing a small electric battery to supply the power, a crystal to undergo the vibrations, and a coupling that will enable the vibrations to turn the hands of a watch.

Here, at least, there is no frequent need for rewinding. So little electricity is required that even a small battery can deliver the necessary power for a year or two before having to be replaced.

The best crystals for the purpose are crystals of quartz, that are hard, uniform, durable, and have vibrations that are almost independent of temperature. The first clock driven by a quartz crystal was built in 1928, and now crystal watches, with tiny quartz crystals cut into the shape of tuning forks, are built so cheaply and in such numbers that watches that have stems and require winding have come to seem archaic and quaint.

The best crystal clocks are so accurate that they could go a hundred thousand years or so (if they could be made to last so long) without gaining or losing more than a second.

But we can do better still. Atoms themselves have natural oscillations. An atomic nucleus has a magnetic field that interacts with the field of the electrons. As a result, the nucleus behaves as though it has an axis of rotation that precesses, that is, move so that its ends mark out circles, billions of times a second.

The basic understanding of this nuclear precession came with the work of the Austrian-American physicist Isidor Isaac Rabi (1898-1988), beginning in 1937. By 1945, Rabi could see that the precession was sufficiently regular to be potentially useful for time measurements, and suggested the construction of "atomic clocks."

Eventually, such atomic clocks were indeed built and were shown to be more accurate than even the best crystal clocks.

Atomic clocks have already served to time Earth's rotation accurately enough to show that our planet is a comparatively lousy clock. Its period of rotation jogs slightly up and down as earthquakes, snowfalls, and storms alter its distribution of mass. It also slows progessively because of tidal action. Atomic clocks can tell us when to add "leap seconds" to the year to keep Earth in step with true time.

The result is that it is no longer necessary to base the length of the standard second on an astronomic motion — on a certain fraction of the year, for instance. Instead, in 1967, the international definition of the second was set as equal to

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9,192,631,770 periods of the oscillation of the cesium atom.

And this is not the ultimate either. It is possible to make use of oscillations of hydrogen atoms under specialized conditions that would yield a clock that would, if it could only be maintained indefinitely, gain or lose not more than a second in a hundred million years. In the entire lifetime of the Universe such a hydrogen clock (if it could have been kept going for that entire period) would have gained or lost not much more than two and a half minutes.

And there is room for still further improvement by making use of lasers and strong cooling. There are also astronomical objects known as "millisecond pulsars" that rotate nearly a thousand times a second, shooting out radio pulses with each rotation, without the gradual slowing effect exhibited by ordinary pulsars. The periodicity of the pulses make them no better than our best atomic clocks, perhaps, but millisecond pulsars require no maintenance, would be upset by nothing short of astronomic catastrophe, and can endure indefinitely.

But why bother? Is there any point in keeping time so accurately?

Yes, there is.

Einstein's special theory of relativity indicates that time slows down with velocity. At extremely high velocities (those of energetic subatomic particles) this slowing effect is noticeable, has been measured and has been shown to check the theory virtually on the nose.

There is, however, a tiny slowing effect even at ordinary velocities, and this is usually described as "immeasurably small." Well, with the best modern clocks, it *isn't* immeasurably small, and it has been measured and shown to check the theory, where one clock is, for instance, kept stationary relative to Earth's surface while the other is carried around the Earth on planes.

By Einstein's general theory of relativity, time also slows in the presence of gravitational fields. This could be measured where the gravitational field is enormously intense, as with pulsars, but the slowing effect is present (though extremely tiny) even in connection with a gravitational field as weak as that of our Sun. That, too, can be measured by the use of atomic clocks.

The general theory also predicts that radio waves will take very slightly longer to reach us if they skim past the Sun in the course of their passage since they then follow a slightly curved path rather than a straight line. This, too, has been checked.

Furthermore, it is becoming

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more and more necessary, in science, to synchronize instruments. Thus, radio telescopes are observing the Universe by way of radio waves that are a million times or more longer than light waves. To see as clearly with radio waves as with light waves would require radio telescopes a million times wider than light telescopes.

This is impractical, but we can build two or more radio telescopes a goodly distance apart and by concentrating on the same object at the same time, it would be as though we had one telescope as wide as the several are separated in distance.

This, however, would mean that the various radio telescopes be in exact synchronization, that a particular radio wave enter all the instruments at the *same* time. This requires the use of the best atomic clocks we have in order to get the synchronization sufficiently exact. The result of our clocks is that we see much *more* clearly, and in much *greater* detail by radio than light. (We are beginning, however, to make use of multiple light telescopes as well.)

Then, too, with extremely good atomic clocks we can measure the rate of rotations of pulsars and check sudden "glitches" in those rates. We can check all sorts of things thought to be constant that might not be *quite* constant.

In short, the better we can make our timekeeping, the more profoundly we can study the Universe in finer and finer detail and the more we can "fill the unforgiving second, with a quintillion equal splits of distance run."

And there you are, Rudyard, old man.

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Paul Di Filippo wrote "Instability" (with Rudy Rucker, September 1988). His new story is the not entirely serious tale of Beaner Wilkins, music critic, and his quest for a recorded masterpiece.

Do You Believe in Magic?

By Paul Di Filippo

THIS IS, LIKE, the worst day of my life, man. It is 7:00 A.M., and I am soundly and peacefully asleep, having been up most of the night writing a review, for the prestigious music 'zine *Magnetic Moment*, of some piece of digitally mastered Pop-Marketplace shit — I don't remember what now; all this modern stuff sounds alike. When I went to sleep, I had no intention of getting up before noon. But my blissful dreams of other days are shattered by this loud scraping noise, followed by a sharp slam.

Well. As soon as I extricate myself from the Komfy Koverlets, which my thrashing limbs have wrapped around my neck in a stranglehold, I realize it is the day of the week that my groceries are delivered. The kid from the market has just pushed a box thru the specially constructed Doggie Door, which has slammed down heavily, since its pneumatic catch is shot.

Having been thus summarily roused, I cannot go back to sleep. I decide to get up. Suddenly I am interested in what the market has sent me, and figure I might as well put it away.

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I rise from my old stained mattress on the floor. I put on clean jeans and sweatshirt, which I washed early yesterday and which have been drying on a line overnight. They are still damp and clammy, and feel like seaweed. This is the pits. I check the Porthole for weather conditions, altho, as per usual, I shall not be going out. (All my windows are painted black. The Porthole is an area high up on one where the paint has flaked irregularly off. The vista thus revealed is a slice of sky and a few square feet of wall.) Conditions are partly cloudly, with patches of brick. Much like every day.

Barefoot, I shuffle over to the box of groceries. Wow, this sucker is heavy! I cannot believe the market has found all these canned goods for me. Shipments lately have been getting sparse. (I refuse to eat any food packed in these new plastic cans. I will take my nourishment from aluminum and tin, or from nothing at all. Plastic cans, man! That's crazy. . . . Unfortunately, there are no Native Goods packed in tin anymore. Thus, I am constrained to subsist on imports from the more traditional and/or backward countries: Portuguese and Norwegian sardines, Welsh meat pies, Spanish octopus, Italian scungilli, North Korean puffer fish, Nigerian hyena parts, Burmese lizard legs, Chinese bamboo shoots — man, it gets kinda depressing.)

I am anxious to investigate this week's offerings. In the patchy dark, I walk with the box over to my old wooden kitchen table and set it down heavily.

There is a heartbreaking CRACK! Too late, I realize what I have done. I lift the box up off the table and set in on a chair. A mournful little whimper escapes from my lips:

"EEEE-YAAAAAAAGH!"

I yank on the pull chain leading to the naked bulb above the table, hoping that I am mistaken. Maybe it is only some piece-a crap like Lionel Ritchie's fifty-first album that I have just turned into vinyl splinters.

But, natch, it's not. I knew it couldn't be.

It is a thirty-year-old masterpiece, an original pressing, the first album I ever bought, the keystone of a vanished decade, the touchstone of my life, now fragmented into irreparable shards, sharp as my sorrow:

Do You Believe in Magic!, by the Lovin' Spoonful.

I was listening to the prized album last night, in order to cleanse my ears of the horrid modern stuff I had been forced to review. I removed it

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from the turntable and, in a moment of bladder-type weakness, forgot to resleeve it. When I got done taking a leak, I had fallen straight into bed. The record lay unprotected all night on the table, forlornly awaiting its fate. . . .

I collapse into a chair. I just cannot believe this. To exist and give happiness and be cherished for three decades, only to be shattered by a load of scungilli. . . . At that moment I hate my stomach. Perhaps I should have switched to plastic cans after all. . . .

Numbly, I stare at the piece of black plastic. Even the paper circle has been ripped by the jagged shards. It's the Kama Sutra label (distributed by MGM): yellow background, red sunburst, green Indian deity with three faces and four arms. Man, there wasn't a scratch or fingerprint on that whole record. It felt so good to handle, substantial and thick, not like latter-day cheap, flimsy platters. . . . It coulda lasted another century.

I look across the room, where sit the unadorned yellowed inner paper (not plastic) sleeve and the outer cardboard jacket. The grinning faces of John, Zal, Joe, and Steve mock me from the jacket, beneath the title in its retro typeface. (Funny, once we woulda called that style modern. But thus it is decreed: yesterday's modern is tomorrow's retro. . . .) John's look is particularly poignant, as he grips the stem of his round wire-rims with two fingers. . . .

I am suddenly having some kinda fit. I cannot breathe, and my chest is tight. I stand up and stumble to the stained porcelain sink. I stick my head under the faucet and run cold water over it. That helps a little. Goddamn it! THAT ALBUM WAS THE CENTER OF MY LIFE! I WAS SIXTEEN WHEN I BOUGHT IT! IT WAS GREAT MUSIC! I WILL NOT LIVE WITHOUT IT!

I realize I have been shouting. Luckily, my neighbors — whoever they may be — have grown used to my noise. At least, I think they have. Anyway, there have been no complaints in ages. Doubtless, if anyone heard my ranting just now, they thought it was merely another record.

I am possessed by a sudden knowledge: it is time for desperate measures. I must leave my apartment to secure another copy of this record, a duplicate original pressing. I really cannot live without it. My life is a precarious assemblage of tactile tokens and sonic symbols. To remove one is to disfigure the whole music mosaic.

The Big Picture must be restored!

I am filled with energy now. I have a Kozmic Kwest.

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I grab my sneakers from beneath a pile of clothing, put them on my bare feet, and lace them up. Now the conditions beyond the Porthole develop increased significance. I look again. Hmm, better have a jacket. I snatch some bills out of the tin where I keep my money and uncashed royalty checks, and stuff them in my jacket pocket. I advance to the door. I stop.

I have not been out of my apartment in twenty years. I believe the last time was around '72. That was when things seemed to turn sour, and I beat my retreat. I have not had any visitors in half that time. My dealings with the world are through the media of mail, telephone lines, and data coaxials. I am not sure the world even exists anymore, in any incarnation other than the records I receive for review.

I am shivering. I DON'T WANT TO GO OUT THERE! I look around my place for some shred of comfort. There are jumbled piles of books, mostly about music. There is a broken television, which has not worked since Dick Clark died. There are banks of audio equipment: receivers, speakers, amps, equalizers, turntables, CD players, DAT drives, regular cassette players, various remote controls. There is an old word-processing setup whereby I file my articles with *Magnetic Moment* and other publishers. And then, natch, there's my record collection: approximately six thousand LPs and as many 45s. They are lovingly filed on shelves and in stacks, the oldest protected by plastic. Among them is the last LP ever pressed by a major firm, the Springsteen five-record set, *Live '85 – '95*, which failed to move even ten thousand units in this format. (I do not keep the CDs and DATs that I receive for review, unless they are reissues of old stuff that I lack. Otherwise, they go out the bathroom window, down the air shaft. I believe the pile has almost reached the second floor.)

The sight of all my possessions reassures me. I must be strong and survive this mission, if only to take care of them. I cannot stand the thought of strangers coming in after my death and breaking up my collection.

I turn back to the door. It has five locks on it, and a bar wedged under the handle and against the floor. I attempt to work the mechanisms, but they are all rusted shut. The bar has sunk immovably into the soft wooden floorboards. I am forced to crawl ignominiously thru the Doggie Door in order to exit my lair.

Man, this hallway is gruesome! Fulla dust 'n' cobwebs 'n' used syringes,

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rags 'n' cinders 'n' windblown trash. There is a trail thru all this junk, which the boy from the market has obviously worn. The path comes as far as my door and no farther. Is this what I am paying my rent-stabilized $125 per month for? I angrily ask myself. While I'm out, I will go see Mr. Gummidge, the landlord, and demand better treatment. What does he think this place is, an abandoned building, fer chrissakes?

That is exactly what it is, I soon discover.

I am living in a bombed-out hulk! All the glass and doors except mine are gone. There are no other tenants, except some rats and dogs and perhaps, from evidence, an occasional squatter. Well, that explains the lack of complaints about my music.... Lord knows why I still got electricity. There was that blackout five years ago; power didn't come back for a week — could it have been hot-wired . . . ? Hey, if there's no super, who's been taking my trash away? Bums, I guess. Surprised the copper plumbing hasn't been gutted. Oh, that's right: it was replaced with some new plastic stuff back in '75. I lodged a futile protest, hated to have my water flowing thru PVC, finally give in and learned to subsist on YOO-HOO CHOCOLATE DRINK, the only beverage that still comes in a real can. . . .

Now I am out on the street. Wow, this neighborhood was never much to look at, but it's really gone downhill!

I am staring at about forty acres of rubble-strewn urban terrain. My building sits in the center of the wasteland, the only halfway-intact structure. The wall I have unwittingly inspected each morning out the Porthole turns out to be merely a freestanding fragment. Man, what happened? This used to be Amsterdam Avenue, man!

I trudge across the desolate, bricky wastes, beneath the sky of gray. Man, this is like waking up in a T. S. Eliot poem!

On the outskirts of my private Twilight Zone, I encounter civilization, in the form of inhabited buildings, uptown and crosstown streets, traffic, commerce, humans.... Man, Harlem never looked so good! I thought it was post–WW III, man! Instead, it appears that only my immediate surroundings have suffered these outrageous ravages.

I approach some soul brothers hanging out in front of a check-cashing joint.

"Hey, bloods, what happened with the war zone?"

They eye me warily. One finally replies.

"The mayor and the po-leece drop a firebomb."

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"What the fuck for?"

"Trying to stop the crack sales."

Wow, so that was what that real hot day had been! I thought it was just regular New York in August. My building must have been protected in some eddy of the flames. . . .

While I have been cogitating, these young black guys have surrounded me menacingly.

"Is you the spook what lives in the haunted tenement?"

"I guess so. . . ."

"You spoze to be real rich. How about handing over some money?"

"Yeah," says another. He produces a gun made of . . . PLASTIC! "Or we gonna grease your ass."

I slap the gun out of his hand, and it goes skidding down the street like a cheap toy. The JDs stare at me unbelievingly. "Man, that was major uncool. Whatcha pointing some *plastic* gun at me for? Dontcha know you're looking at a dude who marched with King?"

The guys all eyeball one another.

"King? Who's he?"

"The brother they made the holiday for."

"Oh yeah. . . ."

"You really known him, man?"

I break my stalwart silence. "Does a bear shit in the woods?"

This old chestnut sends the guys into convulsions. Is it possible they've never heard it . . . ? Whatever the case, when they recover, they are smiling. I take advantage of their good humor to question them.

"Where's the best 'n' biggest record store nowadays?"

"That be Tower Records, down on Broadway in the sixties."

"O.K., all right; thanks, men; let's shake."

These guys are so lame, they don't even know how to shake hands. I gotta twist their thumbs upward in the proper grip. I leave them practicing the shake among themselves, and walk out to Broadway.

The subway costs two dollars now! And the tokens got funny little inserts in 'em. Quality of the ride ain't changed, tho: noisy, crowded, and rough. Car's clean of graffiti, tho. I wonder idly why, until I notice a kid whip out a marker and try to write on the walls. The ink from his pen beads up like water on grease and rolls to the floor. Kid swears — "Shit, they told me this new pen would cut it! Five dollars down the tubes!" —

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and sits back down. I touch the wall; it's dry. Heavy, man, some kinda Teflon Koating. . . .

I mistakenly ride all the way to Columbus Circle and have to walk back uptown to get to Tower Records. Wow, these people are dressed weird. The chicks are all in their underwear — bras and colored leotards; and the men in their pajamas — wrinkled old suits with colored T-shirts. Don't no one change outta their NIGHTCLOTHES no more? Hey, how come *I'm* the one getting all the stares? Must be my hair. Seems like no one else wears it down to their tailbone no more. Screw 'em. Wotta buncha squares. . . .

Here is Tower Records. Wow, is this place garish? My eyes are hurtin' just to look at it. There are more neons and fluorescents here than at Graceland. And to think I usta like light shows. Must be gettin' old. . . . What're all these *televisions* doin' here, anyway? Is this a music store, or an appliance discounter? And all playing these bizarre snippets of bad imitations of Buñuel movies. . . . Oh well, don't matter to me, just go on through the doors, under this weird SCANNER — beam me up, Scotty, hee-hee — and into the store.

Boy, it's crowded. Everyone's got these little cordless buttons in their ears, groovin' and boppin' to some private beat. THIS LOUSY JOINT DON'T EVEN HAVE A P.A. SYSTEM! What kinda rock-'n'-roll community does that make for? Some of my happiest memories are of hearing new stuff in a store, and the whole place groovin' to the same wavelength. . . . Hey, don't see no salesclerks, just a lone cashier. What're those people doing? They're ordering CDs from a computer console that spits them outta a slot! This is hell, man. . . .

I go to the cashier. She is about fifteen, and wears gold earrings shaped like scarabs that crawl up 'n' down her ears on little mechanical legs.

"Peace, lovely lady. Do you perchance have a selection of old LPs for the serious collector?"

"I dunna whatcha mean."

"LPs: vinyl discs spun on a turntable at thirty-three and one-third revolutions per minute, the single groove of which, when interpreted by a stylus, produces music."

The waif pouts sullenly. "You're yankin' my rods. There ain't no such thing."

"Is there anyone else I could talk to?"

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A foreman wearing an eyepatch snaps a bullwhip over their scarred backs.

"I dunno. Check the back room."

I find a door I assume leads to the stockroom. Unwittingly, I open it.

Brawny, sweaty laborers naked to the waist are wielding huge shovels with which they scoop up CDs and DATs out of an enormous pile and dump them into a hopper that leads to the dispensing devices. A foreman wearing an eyepatch snaps a bullwhip over their scarred backs. He spots me and yells, "An intruder! Get 'em, boys, before he escapes!"

I slam the door and make like a Kleenex and blow. Feets, don't fail me now!

Several blocks down Broadway, I stop, outta breath. Man, this is the most exercise I've gotten in years. I seem to have shaken my pursuers, the Devil Dogs of the Rekord Industry. I lean against a building to rest, and gaze around.

An address across the street looks familiar. It comes to me then that I am staring directly at the building that houses the offices of *Magnetic Moment!* Wow, what synchronicity, man! I decide to go with the flow. I must enter and reveal myself to the staff. I am sure I will be enthusiastically received. Their Most Senior Kontributor, the Human Encyclopedia of Rock, Mr. Pop-Popularizer Himself.

I enter the building; I ascend in an elevator that queries me for my destination mechanically; I emerge in a ritzy lobby. There is a gorgeous chick seated behind a desk. In her underwear, natch.

"Peace, ma'am. Would you announce to all and sundry that Mr. Beaner Wilkins has descended from the heights to greet the faithful and unclog their mental arteries with some Zany and Zesty Zen Zappers?"

The chick glares at me with ill-concealed distaste. She thumbs an intercom button and says into the speaker, "Hello, Security, it's another one."

Barely does she remove her manicured digit from the button, when four immense Anthropods in suits emerge from concealed doors and make free with my personal limbs in a painful manner.

"Hey, you pigs, what gives? Leggo, cut me loose, put me down, chill out! I didn't do nothin'. I am a respected staff member of this rag, and just wish to see my editor!"

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"That's what they all say," grunts one of the Musclemen,who has my neck held like a pencil between his thumb and forefinger.

"All who? I don't know any of these other jerks to whom you refer. I'm me, Beaner Wilkins, a Lone Wolf. I do not associate with any cliques, claques, covens, or cabals."

It is no use. I am being hustled toward the elevator. My shouts have attracted a crowd of office workers, who cluster at doors watching my humiliation.

"Emilio!" I yell. "Emilio Cuchillo!" I spot the shiny face of my young editor at the rear of the crowd. "It's I, Emilio — Beaner!"

He looks dubious, but does not attempt to restrain the Security Apes. I make a move to break loose.

"Hey, that does it," says a guard. "Put the cuffs on him."

Bracelets clack shut on my wrist.

"ARGH! Plastic! Get it off, get it off, gedditoff!"

Somehow, Emilio is by my side. "It's all right, guys; there's been a misunderstanding. This fellow has an appointment. I'll see him now."

Dubiously, the semisentient hulks comply. I am released into Emilio's custody. Mustering all the dignity I can, I adjust my headband and untangle the long fringes of my leather jacket. Then I accompany Emilio into his office.

When we are both seated, Emilio, leaning forward with forearms on his desk, stares at me for several minutes. At last he speaks.

"It really is you. I can spot the likeness to that old picture we run above your column. You know, the crowd scene from Woodstock, where you're covered in mud. Beaner Wilkins. . . . I can't believe it. You know, sometimes we used to speculate whether or not you were actually dead, and the columns were being written by computer."

"I am obviously not dead, man. I just value my privacy. Also, this modern-day world is not one I care to associate overmuch with. But listen — what made you jump in and save me?"

"Well, first you have to understand that we get at least one nutcase a month showing up claiming to be Beaner Wilkins. There's quite a myth surrounding you, you know. Seems to attract all the dissatisfied types from every generation. So at first, you see, I had no suspicion you might actually be telling the truth. It was that business with the cuffs that alerted me. I remembered that the real Beaner hated — hates — plastic."

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I am relaxing a little now, and feel I can afford to be generous with my praise. "It was , like, very astute of you, Emilio. I am glad your memory was so accurate, since I did not relish the prospect of greeting the pavement with my face."

"That one fact always stuck in my head. I thought it was funny that someone whose whole life revolved around old-fashioned records would hate plastic so much. Sorta contradictory. . . ."

"I do not ingest or wear records; therefore, their plasticity does not bother me. However, food encased in hydrocarbon derivatives, or clothing fashioned of same, rubs me the wrong way."

Emilio sits back in his chair. "So, Beaner, what brings you out?"

Before I can answer, I am suddenly seized by this Sahara-type thirst. The events of the day have parched my throat. "Got anything to drink, Emilio?" I ask.

Emilio stabs an intercom. "Ms. Orson, please bring us a couple of Cokes—"

"Hold on," I demur. "Is it in, like, plastic cans?"

"Why, of course — oh, I see. Cancel that order, Ms. Orson. Beaner, I don't know what to do—"

My eyes have been roving over the office all this time, and now light on a trophy case containing a leather jacket, a pocket comb, a burned husk of a guitar — and A CAN OF YOO-HOO! Without asking, I go to the case, reach inside, and in a second have popped the Yoo-Hoo.

Emilio screams!

"Cool it, man," I advise. "What's wrong?"

"That can! Do you know who last touched that can?"

"No. . . ."

"John Lennon, just minutes before he was shot!"

"Oh. . . ." I look inside, and, sure enough, there're little cards by each item: Lou Reed's jacket, Hendrix's guitar, Elvis's comb, Lennon's Yoo-Hoo. . . . Oh, well, man . . . *sic transit gloria* and all that. . . .

Sitting back down, I explain the nature of my Kwest. Emilio, wiping the tears from his eyes, nods. When I am finished, he is mostly recovered.

"You've really set yourself a chore, Beaner," he says forgivingly. "Nobody wants those old LPs anymore, and so hardly anyone sells them. Your only shot might be this one store down in the Village—"

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"Of course! The Village, the very birthplace of the Lovin' Spoonful, spiritual home to every malcontent and freethinker, every beatnik and hippie and punk, who has ever walked the globe! Surely, in one of the myriad second-hand record stores in the Village, I will find a copy of my beloved album!"

"Yeah, well, I think you might have a nostalgic view of reality—"

"No way, man; I am still plugged in."

"Yeah, maybe . . . but 'plugged in' to what?"

I ignore Emilio's sarcasm, and arise, eager to be off. "Emilio, it has been extremely groovy to make your editorial acquaintance in person, but now I must split. I trust my columns have been satisfactory. . . ?"

"Yeah, they're O.K. They pull in readers of your generation — who represent a big market share and have powerful demographics — and they give everyone else a laugh. But don't you think you could lighten up a little on modern music? I mean, you haven't praised anything since Madonna's album with the Grateful Dead, just before her daughter was born — and that was six years ago, now!"

"I will continue to call them as I see them, Emilio. Let musicians produce good music, and I will praise it. But I will not hype prefab shit."

Emilio shakes his head in mock woefulness and gets up to see me out. "Well, that's hot as fusion, Beaner, and I'm on the downlink to your telemetry with minimal noise. Just hang in there, old survivor. What is it you guys used to say? Keep on trackin'!"

"That's *truckin'*."

"Oh. I thought it was like a tonearm. . . ."

Emilio sees me down to the street. Then I am back on the subway, heading for the Village.

I emerge in Union Square.

Something is really wrong, man.

There is a turreted wall around the Village, all fake boulders and pennons fluttering in the breeze. There is a gate at Broadway guarded by Mickey Mouse and Goofy. They are wearing side arms.

Tentatively, I advance, gradually becoming one with a horde of tourist types, who I hope will provide some kind of cover.

Mickey spots me in the crowd, tho, and gestures for me to step aside. I do not argue with mice bearing weapons; therefore, I comply.

"Where the hell is your ID badge?" says the Famous Mouse.

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"Uh, I forgot it at home . . . ?"

"Jeez, you guys are getting too deep into your roles, being such screw-ups. All right, listen close: just this once, I'm gonna give you a temporary ID. Don't let it happen again."

"I certainly won't, Mr. Mouse. Thank you, thank you kindly."

With a holographic badge bearing the Disney logo pinned to my jacket, I am waved past the ticket taker beyond the gates.

I immediately experience a flashback to 1967.

The streets are filled with Children of Aquarius, long-haired guys 'n' gals flashing the peace sign to each other and to the tourists, posing for photos, smokin' what smells like authentic reefer rolled as big as sausages. The Beatles blast out of every window.

What the fuck is going on here!

When I cross Tenth Street and find myself surrounded by cats dressed all in black spouting Allen Ginsberg, I dig the scene.

THE WHOLE VILLAGE IS NOW A DISNEY THEME PARK!

Sure enuff, there is a punk enclave over on the Bowery, buncha skinheads endlessly pogoing to an audio-animatronic Ramones.

I sit down.

I begin to cry.

When I am all cried out, I arise. All I wanna do is find my album and get outta here. Emilio said something about a secondhand record store. . . .

I find the place over on Bleecker Street, next to a glitzed-up jazz joint that advertises Michael Jackson doing a show wherein he impersonates Charlie Parker (NITELY AT SIX AND EIGHT).

Heartbroken, I go into the store.

The place features Day-Glo Posters and the smell of incense. The Jefferson Airplane is being piped out of hokey little speakers: "Do you want somebody to love?" Yeah . . . ! There is a young chick behind the counter, dressed in costume, but I ignore her in favor of the stock.

Gotta hand it to the Disney Empire; they don't spare no expense. It is all the Pure Quill here, rare original pressings from the fifties 'n' sixties, snug in their Mylar envelopes. The price tags are what you'd expect, most items under a thousand.

Behind the black divider printed with a psychedelic *L*, I find it.

Do You Believe in Magic, by the Lovin' Spoonful, for only eight hundred smackers.

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I clutch the Sacred Disc to my breast and approach the counter. The girl smiles.

"Checking out the old stuff on your break?" she asks. "I don't blame you; it's so much better than what passes for music nowadays."

I figure she is just laying the Standard Patter on me, so I merely nod and begin fumbling bills out of my pocket. However, all the cash I have amounts only to half a grand. Bummer! I dig out a royalty check from my last book, *Dylan: The Final Years*. It is for three thousand bucks.

"Listen, I need this record badly, babe, and I don't wanna wait any longer to get home. Can I just make out this check to you? You can cash it, and pocket the difference."

The girl examines the check. Her eyes get wide.

"Beaner Wilkins? *The* Beaner Wilkins? Are you really him?"

I straighten my spine. "Yeah, I'm me. Look." I produce my long-expired driver's license and pass it over.

"Oh my God, I can't believe this. I never thought when I took this job — I mean, to actually have you come into the store. Why, I read your column every month! And all your books — I've read every one at least twice! The things you've seen and done, the era you grew up in — It's so wonderful, so — so magic! Not like these times —"

"Yeah, yeah," I say, anxious to make tracks away from this farce, this parody of glorious long ago. "Now, will you take the check or not?"

"Oh sure, Mr. Wilkins, for you."

I prepare to endorse the check over to her. "Name?"

"Janis Smialowski. That's J-A-N-I-S, not I-C-E."

I am momentarily interested. "Not after —"

She beams. "Yes. My folks loved her."

Completing the endorsement, I hand the check over to her. She studies it raptly, then says, "I might not cash this. I mean, I could keep it for your autograph. I'll pay the store out of my own pocket."

Is this dollybird pulling my leg? I can't figure her out. She is the nicest person I've met out here, but she makes me uneasy. All confused, I try to settle my thoughts by imagining my apartment full of music and memories, its warmth, the security, the peace, the lack of challenges —

A tune I barely acknowledge as within my era — Steely Dan's "Hey Nineteen" — starts up, and I realize I am listening to a premixed tape. No playing of whole sides allowed, too much chance for taste to enter. . . .

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Disgusted, bewildered, I make my exit, gripping my precious album tightly.

The chick calls out to my back, "Please stop by again sometime, Mr. Wilkins."

I am out on the streets, halfway to the gate, heading home.

I stop.

I return to the store.

When Janis sees me, she smiles like sunshine.

"Janis, would you like to drop by tonight and groove to some old tunes?"

"O, Mr. Wilkins — I'd love to!"

This is, like, the best day of my life, man.

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Delia Sherman made her appearance in F & SF *in October of 1987 with her darkly lyrical tale "The Maid on the Shore." With this, her second story, she further explores the realms of the deeps, and the motives of humans when contemplating its denizens. She tells of a woman who sees fulfillment and who almost cannot give it up.*

MISS CARSTAIRS AND THE MERMAN

By Delia Sherman

THE NIGHT MISS CARstairs first saw the merman, there was a great storm along the Massachusetts coast. Down in the harbor town, old men sat in the taverns drinking hot rum and cocking a knowledgeable ear at the wind whining and whistling in the chimneys. A proper nor'easter, they said, a real widow-maker, and they huddled closer to the acrid fires while the storm gnawed at the town. It ripped shingles from roofs; it tore small boats from their moorings and flung them against the long piers. Strong gusts leaped across the dunes and set Miss Carstairs's tall white house surging and creaking like a great ship.

High on the bluffs above the town, Miss Carstairs was sitting by the uncurtained window of her study, watching the lightning dazzle on the water, and peering, from time to time, through a long telescope. With her square hands steady upon the telescope's barrel, she watched the wind-blown sand and rain scour her garden and pit the glass of her window.

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In kinetoscopic bursts, she saw a capsized dinghy scud past her beach and a gull beaten across the dunes; and at about midnight, she saw a long, dark, seal-sleek shape cast up on the rocky beach, flounder for a moment in the retreating surf, and then lie still.

Miss Carstairs calculated that the shape lay not two hundred yards from her aerie in a shallow tidal pool, which was, for the moment, holding it safe. She put aside the telescope and hesitated for a moment with her hand upon the bellpull. It was a filthy night. Yet, if it really was a seal washed into that tidal pool, she wanted to secure it before it washed out again.

The peculiarities of ocean storms and seals had been familiar to Miss Carstairs since earliest childhood. Whenever she could slip away from her nurse, she would explore the beach or the salt marshes behind her father's house, returning from these expeditions disheveled: her pinafore pockets stuffed with shells, her stockings torn and sodden, her whole small person reeking, her mother used to say, like the flats at low tide. On these occasions, Mrs. Carstairs would scold her daughter and send her supperless to bed. But her father usually contrived to slip into her room, bearing a bit of cranberry bread, perhaps, and would read to her from Linnaeus or Hans Andersen's fairy tales or Lyell's *Natural History*.

Mr. Carstairs, himself an amateur ichthyologist, delighted in his daughter's intelligence. He kept her crabs and mussels in the stone pond he had built in the conservatory for his exotic oriental fish. When Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* was published, he presented her with a copy for her fifteenth birthday. He would not hear of her attending the village school with the children of the local fishermen, but taught her mathematics and Latin and logic himself, telling her mother that he would have no prissy governess stuffing the head of his little scientist with a load of womanish nonsense.

By the time Mr. Carstairs died, his daughter had turned up her hair and let down her skirts; but she still loved to tramp all day along the beaches. Her mother lectured her daily on the joys of the married state and drained the pond in the conservatory. Miss Carstairs was sorry about the pond, but she knew she had only to endure and she would eventually have the means to please herself. So endure she did for five years, saying, "Yes, Mama," and "No, Mama," until the day when Mrs. Carstairs followed her husband to the grave, a disappointed woman.

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As soon as her mother died, Miss Carstairs ordered a proper collecting case and a set of scalpels and an anatomy text from Codman and Shurtleff in Boston. She lived very much alone, despising the merchants' and fish-brokers' wives who formed the society of the town. They, in turn, despised her. Wealth, they whispered over cups of Indian tea, was utterly wasted on a woman who would all too obviously never marry, being not only homely as a haddock, but a bluestocking as well.

A bluestocking Miss Carstairs may have been, but she looked nothing like a fish. She had a broad, low brow; a long jaw; and her Scottish father's high, flat cheekbones. Wind and cold had creased her skin and made it brown as a fisherman's, and her thin hair was silver-gray like the weathered shingles on the buildings along the wharf. She was tall and sturdy and fit as a man from long tramps on the marshes. She was patient, as a scientist must be, and over the years had taught herself classification and embryology and enough about conventional scientific practices to write articles acceptable to *The American Naturalist* and the Boston Society of Natural History. By the time she was forty-nine, "E. Monroe Carstairs" had earned the reputation of being very sound on the *mollusca* of the New England coast.

In the course of preparing these articles, Miss Carstairs had collected hundreds of specimens, and little jars containing pickled *Cephalopoda* and *Gastropoda* lined her study shelves in grim profusion. But she had living barnacles and sea slugs as well, housed in the pool in the conservatory, where they kept company with lobsters and crabs and feathery sea worms in a kind of miniature ocean. When she had her father's goldfish pond repaired, Miss Carstairs had fitted it out with a series of pumps and filters to bring seawater up from the bay and keep it clean and fresh. In shape the pond was a wide oval, built up at the sides with a mortared stone coping, and it nestled in an Eden of Boston ferns and sweet-smelling mint geraniums. Miss Carstairs was very proud of it, and proud of the collection of marine life it housed. Stocking it with healthy specimens of rare fauna was the chief pleasure of her life, and summer and winter she spent much of her time out stalking the tidal flats after a neap tide or exploring the small brackish pools of the salt marshes. But nothing was as productive of unusual specimens as a roaring gale, which, in beating the ocean to a froth, swept up shells and crabs from its very floor.

As Miss Carstairs stood now with her hand upon the bellpull, her wide

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experience of such storms told her that she must either bring in the seal immediately, or watch it wash away with the tide. She pulled sharply on the bell, and when the maid Sarah sleepily answered it, ordered her to rouse Stephen and John without delay and have them meet her in the kitchen passage. "Tell them to bring the lantern, and the stretcher we used for the shark last spring," she said. "And bring me my sou'wester and my boots."

Soon the two oilclothed men, yawning behind their hands, awaited Miss Carstairs in the dark kitchen. Although they had been rousted out of their beds in the middle of the night and knew they were in for a wet and dangerous scramble over slippery ground, the men were unresentful. Truth to tell, they were secretly proud of the forthright eccentricity of their mistress, who kept lobsters in a fancy pool instead of eating them, and traipsed manfully over the marshes and mud flats in all weather. If Miss Carstairs wanted to go out into the worst nor'easter in ten years to collect some rare grampus or other, then the least they could do was to go along and help her.

Miss Carstairs led the way with the lantern, and the little company groped its way down the slippery wooden stairs to the beach. The thunder had rolled away, taking with it the confusing spurts of lightning. The lantern illuminated glimpses of scattered flotsam: gouts of seaweed and beached fish, broken seagulls and strange shells. Miss Carstairs, untempted, ran straight before the wind toward the rocks at the lip of the bay and the tidal pool imprisoning her quarry.

Whatever the creature was, it was not a seal. The dim yellow lantern gave only the most imperfect outline of its shape, but Miss Carstairs could see that it was more slender than a seal, and lacked a pelt. Its front flippers looked peculiarly long and flexible, and it seemed to have a crest of bony spines down its back. Something was familiar about its shape, about the configuration of its upper body and head.

Miss Carstairs was just bending to take a closer look, when Stephen's "Well, Miss?" drew her guiltily upright. The wind was picking up; it was more than time to be getting back to the house. She stood out of the way while the men unfolded a bundle of canvas and sticks into a wide stretcher like a sailor's hammock suspended between two long poles. Into this contrivance they bundled their find and, in case it might still be alive, covered it with a blanket soaked in seawater. Clumsily, because of the

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wind and the swaying weight of their burden, the men crossed the beach and labored up the wooden stairs, wound through the garden and up two shallow stone steps to the large glass conservatory built daringly onto the sea side of the house.

When Miss Carstairs opened the conservatory door, the wind extinguished most of the gaslights Sarah had thoughtfully lit there. So it was in a poor half-light that the men hoisted their burden to the edge of the pool and tipped the creature out onto the long boulder that had once served as a sunning place for Mr. Carstairs's terrapins. The lax body rolled heavily onto the rock; Miss Carstairs eyed it doubtfully while the men panted and wiped at their streaming faces.

"I don't think you should submerge it entirely," she said finally. "If it's still alive, being out of the water a little longer shouldn't hurt it, and if it is not, I don't want the lobsters getting it before I do." The men positioned the creature, then shut off the gas cocks and squished off to their beds.

For a few minutes, Miss Carstairs stood biting thoughtfully at her forefinger and looking down at her new specimen. Spiky and naked, it did not look like anything she had ever seen or read about in Allen, Grey, or von Haast. But many common objects look strange in the dark, and calling Sarah back to relight the gas hardly seemed worthwhile. She might as well go to bed and study her find by the light of day. But when she ascended the stairs, her footsteps led her not to her bedroom but to her study, where she spent the rest of the night in restless perusal of True's *Catalog of Aquatic Mammals*.

At six o'clock, Miss Carstairs rang for Sarah to bring her rolls and coffee. By 6:30 she had eaten, bathed and dressed herself, and was on her way to the conservatory. Her find lay as she had left it, half in and half out of the water. Growing from its muscular tail was a powerful torso, scaleless and furless and furnished with what looked like arms, jointed like a human's and roped with long, smooth muscles under a protective layer of fat. Its head was round and flanked by a pair of ears shaped and webbed like fins.

At first, Miss Carstairs refused to believe the evidence of her eyes. Perhaps, she thought, she was overtired from reading all night. The creature, whatever it was, would soon yield its secrets to her scalpel and prove to be nothing more wonderful than a deformed porpoise or a freak manatee.

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She took its head in her hands. Its skin was cool and pliant and slimy: very unpleasant to touch, as though a fish had sloughed its scales but not its protective mucus. She lifted its thick, lashless lids to reveal pearly eyes, rolled upward. She had never touched nor seen the like. A new species, perhaps? A new genus?

With a rising excitement, Miss Carstairs palpated its skull, which was hairless and smooth except for the spiny ridge bisecting it, and fingered the slight protrusion between its eyes and lipless mouth. The protrusion was both fleshy and cartilaginous, like a human nose, and as Miss Carstairs acknowledged the similarity, the specimen's features resolved into an unmistakably anthropoid arrangement of eyes, nose, mouth, and chin. The creature was, in fact, neither deformed nor freakish, but in its own way as harmoniously formed and perfectly adapted to its environment as an elephant or a chimpanzee. A certain engraving in a long-forgotten book of fairy tales came to her mind, of a wistful child with a human body and a fish's tail.

Miss Carstairs plumped heavily into her wicker chair. Here, lying on a rock in her father's goldfish pond, was a species never examined by Mr. Darwin or classified by Linnaeus. Here was a biological anomaly, a scientific impossibility. Here, in short, was a mermaid, and she, Edith Carstairs, had collected it.

Shyly, almost reverently, Miss Carstairs approached the creature anew. She turned the lax head toward her, then prodded at its wide, lipless mouth to get a look at its teeth. A faint, cool air fanned her fingers, and she snatched them back as though the creature had bitten her. Could it be alive? Miss Carstairs laid her hand flat against its chest and felt nothing; hesitated, laid her ear where her hand had been, and heard a faint thumping, slower than a human heartbeat.

In a terror lest it awake before she could examine it properly, Miss Carstairs snatched up her calipers and her sketchbook and began to make detailed notes of its anatomy. She measured its cranium, which she found to be as commodious as most men's, and traced its webbed, four-fingered hands. She sketched it full-length from all angles, then made piecemeal studies of its head and finny ears, its curiously muscled torso and its horny claws. From the absence of external genitalia and the sleek roundness of its limbs and body, she thought her specimen to be female even though it lacked the melon breasts and streaming golden hair of legend.

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But breasts and streaming hair would drag terribly, Miss Carstairs thought: a real mermaid would be better off without them. By the same token, a real merman would be better off without the drag of external genitals. On the question of its sex, Miss Carstairs decided to reserve judgment.

Promptly at one o'clock, Sarah brought her luncheon — a cutlet and a glass of barley water — and still the creature lay unconscious. Miss Carstairs swallowed the cutlet hastily between taking wax impressions of the creature's claws and scraping slime from its skin to examine under her microscope. She drew a small measure of its thin scarlet blood, and poked curiously at the complexity of tissue fringing the apparent opening of its ears, which had no parallel in any lunged aquatic animal. It might, she thought, be gills.

By seven o'clock, Miss Carstairs had abandoned hope. She leaned over her mermaid, pinched the verdigris forearm between her nails, and looked closely at the face for some sign of pain. The wide mouth remained slack; the webbed ears lay flat and unmoving against the skull. It must be dead after all. It seemed that she would have to content herself with dissecting the creature's cadaver, and now was not too early to begin. So she laid out her scalpels and her bone saw, and rang for the men to hoist the specimen out of the pool and onto the potting table.

"Carefully, carefully, now." Miss Carstairs hovered anxiously as Stephen and John struggled with the slippery bulk, and sighed as they dropped it belly-down over the stone coping. Suddenly the creature gave a great huff of air and twitched as though it had been electrified. Then it flopped backward, twisted eel-quick under the water, and peered up at Miss Carstairs from the bottom of the pool, fanning its webbed ears and gaping. Stumbling and slipping in their haste, the men fled.

Fairly trembling with excitement, Miss Carstairs leaned over the water and stared at her acquisition. The mer-creature, mouthing the water, stared back. The tissue in front of its ears fluttered rhythmically, and Miss Carstairs knew a moment of pure scientific gratification. Her hypothesis was proved correct; it did indeed have gills as well as lungs.

The mer undulated gently from crest to tail-tip, then darted from one extremity of the pool to the other, sending water slopping into Miss Carstairs's lap. She recoiled, shook out her skirts, and looked up to see the mer peering over the coping, its eyes deep-set, milk-blue, and as intelligently mournful as a whipped dog's.

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Involuntarily, Miss Carstairs smiled, then frowned again hastily. Had not Mr. Darwin suggested that to most lower animals, a smile is a simple baring of the teeth, a sign of dominance and not of friendship? If the creature was the anthropomorph it appeared to be, a kind of oceanic ape, then might it not, as apes do, find her well-meant smile as sinister and challenging as a shark's grinning maw? Was a mer a mammal, or was it a fish, an amphibian, even a reptile? Did it properly belong to a genus at all, or was it, like the platypus, sui generis? She must reread Mr. Gunther's *The Study of Fishes* and J. E. Grey on seals.

While Miss Carstairs was pondering its origins, the mer seemed to be pondering Miss Carstairs. It held her eyes steadily with its pearly gaze, and Miss Carstairs began to fancy that she heard — no, it was rather that she sensed — a reverberant, rhythmic hushing like a swift tide withdrawing over the sand of a sea cave.

The light shimmered before her eyes, and she shook her head and recalled that she had not eaten since lunch. A glance at the watch pinned to her breast told her that it was now past nine o'clock. Little wonder she was giddy, what with having had no sleep the night before and working over the mer-creature all day. Her eyes turned again to her specimen. She had intended ringing for fish and feeding it from her own hand, but now thought she would retire to her own belated supper and leave its feeding to the servants.

THE NEXT morning, much refreshed by her slumbers, Miss Carstairs returned to the conservatory armored with a bibbed denim apron and rubber boots. The mer was sitting perched on the highest point of the rock with its long fish's tail curled around it, looking out over the rose beds to the sea.

It never moved when Miss Carstairs entered the conservatory, but gazed steadily out at the bright vista of water and rocky beach. It sat extremely upright, as if disdaining the unaccustomed weight of gravity on its spine, and its spiky crest was fully erect. One clawed hand maintained its balance on the rock; the other was poised on what Miss Carstairs was obliged to call its thigh. The wide flukes of its yellow-bronze tail draped behind and around it like a train and trailed on one side down to the water. This attitude was to become exceedingly familiar to Miss Carstairs in the weeks and months that followed; but on this first morning, it struck

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her as being at once human and alien, pathetic and comic, like a trousered chimpanzee riding a bicycle in a circus.

Having already sketched it from all angles, what Miss Carstairs chiefly wanted now was for the mer to do something. Now that it was awake, she was hesitant to touch it, for its naked skin and high forehead made it look oddly human, and its attitude forbade familiarity. Would it hear her, she wondered, if she called it? Or were those earlike fans merely appendages to its gills?

Standing near the edge of the pool, Miss Carstairs clapped her hands sharply. One fluke stirred in the water, but that might have been coincidence. She cleared her throat. Nothing. She climbed upon a low stool, stood squarely in the creature's field of vision, and said quite firmly, "How d'ye do?" Again, nothing, if she excepted an infinitesimal shivering of its skin that she might have imagined. "Boo!" cried Miss Carstairs then, waving her arms in the air and feeling more than a little foolish. "Boo! Boo!"

Without haste, the mer brought its eyes to her face and seemed to study her with a grave, incurious attention. Miss Carstairs climbed down and clasped her hands behind her back. Now that she had its attention, what would she do with it?

Conquering a most unscientific shrinking, Miss Carstairs unclasped her hands and reached one of them out to it, palm upward, as if it had been a strange dog. The mer immediately dropped from its upright seat to a sprawling crouch, and to Miss Carstairs's horrified fascination, the movement released from a pouch beneath its belly a boneless, fleshy ocher member that could only be its — unmistakably male — genitalia.

Feeling a most uncomfortable heat in her cheeks, Miss Carstairs hid her confusion in a Boston fern, praying that the merman would withdraw his nakedness, or at least hide it in the water. But when she turned back, he was still stretched at full length along the stone, his outsized privates boldly — Miss Carstairs could only think defiantly — displayed. He was smiling.

There was nothing pleasant, welcoming, friendly, or even tangentially human about the merman's smile. His mouth gaped and was full of needle teeth. The palate was deeply ridged, the gorge pale rose and palpitating. He had no tongue.

Although she might be fifty years old and a virgin, Miss Carstairs was no delicate maiden lady. Before she was a spinster or even a woman, she

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was a naturalist, and she immediately forgot the merman's formidable sexual display in wonder at his formidable dentition. Orally, at least, the merman was all fish. His gaping grin displayed to advantage the tooth plate lining his lower jaw, the respiratory lamellae flanking his pharynx, the inner gill septa. Miss Carstairs seized her notebook, licked the point of her pencil, and began to sketch diligently. Once she glanced up to verify the double row of teeth in the lower jaw. The merman was still grinning at her. A moment later she looked again; he had disappeared. Hurriedly, Miss Carstairs laid aside her book and searched the pool. Yes, there he was at the deep end, belly-down against the pebbled bottom.

Miss Carstairs seated herself upon the coping to think. If the merman had noted her shock at the sight of his genitals, then his flourishing them might be interpreted as a deliberate attempt to discomfit his captor. On the other hand, the entire display could have been a simple example of instinctive aggression, like a male mandrill presenting his crimson posterior to an intruder. Had the merman acted from instinct or intelligence?

A light touch on her hand roused Miss Carstairs from her meditations. Considerably startled, she nonetheless refrained from snatching her hand away, instead slowly moving her head until she could see into the pool. The merman floated just below her, his hand alone breaking the surface of the water, and Miss Carstairs found herself staring full into his iridescent eyes. She heard — or thought she heard — a noise of water rushing over sand; saw — or thought she saw — a glimmer as of sun filtered through clear water. Then the merman somersaulted neatly and dove into a hollow under the rock.

Miss Carstairs mounted to her study and picked up her pen to record her observations. As she inscribed the incident, she became increasingly convinced that the merman's action must be the result of deliberate intention. No predator — and the merman's teeth left no doubt that he was a predator — would instinctively bare rather than protect the most vulnerable portion of his anatomy. He must, therefore, have exposed himself in a gesture of defiance and contempt. But such a line of reasoning, however theoretically sound, did not go far in proving that her merman was capable of reasoned behavior. She must find a way to test his intelligence empirically.

Lifting her eyes from her notebook, Miss Carstairs looked blindly out over the autumn-bright ocean glittering below her. The duke of Argyll

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had written that Man was unique among animals in being a tool-user. On the other hand, Mr. Darwin had argued persuasively that chimpanzees and orangutans commonly use sticks and stones to open hard nuts or knock down fruit. But surely no animal lower than an ape would think to procure his food using anything beyond his own well-adapted natural equipment?

Since he was immured in a kind of free-swimming larder, Miss Carstairs could not count upon the merman's being hungry enough to spring her trap for the bait alone, so the test must engage his curiosity. Trap: now there was an idea. What if she were to use one of the patent wire rattraps stacked in the garden shed? She could put a fish in a rattrap — a live fish, she thought, would prove more attractive than a dressed one — and offer the merman an array of tools with which to open it — a crowbar, perhaps a pair of wire snips. Yes, thought Miss Carstairs, she would put the fish in a rattrap and throw it in the pool to see what the merman would make of it.

Next morning the merman had resumed his station on the rock looking, if anything, more woebegone than he had the day before. Somewhat nervously, Miss Carstairs entered the conservatory carrying a bucket of water with a live mackerel in it. She was followed by Stephen, who was laden with the rattrap, a crowbar, a pair of wire snips, and a small hacksaw. With his help, Miss Carstairs introduced the mackerel into the trap and lowered it into the deep end of the pool. Then she dismissed Stephen, positioned herself in the wicker chair, pulled *Descent of Man* from her pocket, and pretended to read.

For a quarter of an hour or so, the tableau held. Miss Carstairs sat, the merman sat, the rattrap with its mackerel rested on the sandy bottom of the pool, and the tools lay on the coping as on a workbench, with the handles neatly turned toward their projected user. Finally, Miss Carstairs slapped over the page and humphed disgustedly; the merman slithered off the rock into the pool.

A great rolling and slopping of briny water ensued. When the tumult ceased, the merman's head popped up, grinning ferociously. He was clearly incensed, and although his attitude was comic, Miss Carstairs was not tempted to laugh.

With an audible snap, the merman shut his gaping mouth, lifted the rattrap onto the rock, hauled himself up beside it, and carefully examined the tools set out before him. The wire snips he passed over without

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But being sensible would not teach her why the merman sought to mesmerize her.

hesitation. The hacksaw he felt with one finger, which he hastily withdrew when he caught it upon the ragged teeth; Miss Carstairs was interested to see that he carried the injured member to his mouth to suck just as a man or a monkey would. Then he grasped the crowbar and brought it whistling down upon the trap, distorting it enough for him to see that one end was not made all of a piece with the rest. He steadied the trap with one hand and, thrusting the crowbar through the flap, pried it free with a single mighty heave. Swiftly, he reached inside and grabbed the wildly flapping mackerel.

For a time the merman held the fish before him as if debating what to do with it. He looked from the fish to Miss Carstairs and from Miss Carstairs to the fish, and she heard a sound like a sigh, accompanied by a slight fluttering of his gill flaps. This sigh, combined with his habitual expression of settled melancholy, made his attitude so like that of an elderly gentleman confronted with unfamiliar provender that Miss Carstairs smiled a little in spite of herself. The merman stiffened and gazed at her intently. A long moment passed, and Miss Carstairs heard once more a low susurration, saw once more a silver-blue glittering.

Now, Miss Carstairs was not a woman given either to the vapors or to lurid imaginings. Thunderstorms that set more delicate nerves quivering merely stimulated her; bones and entrails left her unmoved. Furthermore, she was never ill and had never been subject to sick headaches. So, when her head began to throb and her eyes to dazzle with sourceless pinwheels of light, Miss Carstairs simply closed her eyes to discover whether the effect would disappear. The sound of rushing waters receded; the throb subsided to a dull ache. She opened her eyes to the merman's pearly stare, and sound and pain and glitter returned.

At this point she thought it would be only sensible to avert her eyes. But being sensible would not teach her why the merman sought to mesmerize her or why his stare caused her head to ache so. Briefly, she wondered whether he intended to crawl from his rock and tear out her throat with his needle teeth when she was sufficiently stupified. She dismissed the thought half conceived and abandoned herself to his gaze.

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All at once, Miss Carstairs found herself at sea. Chilly green-gray depths extended above and below her; fishy shadows darted past the edges of her vision. She was swimming in a strong and unfamiliar current. The ocean around her tasted of storm and rocks and fear. She knew beyond doubt that she was being swept ever closer to a strange shore, and although she was strong, she was afraid. Her tail scraped sand; the current crossed with windblown waves and conspired to toss her ashore. Bruised, torn, gasping for breath in the thin air, Miss Carstairs fainted.

She came to herself some little time later, her eyes throbbing viciously and her ears ringing. The merman was nowhere to be seen. Slowly, Miss Carstairs dragged herself to her chair and rang for Sarah. She would need tea, perhaps even a small brandy, before she could think of mounting the stairs. She felt slightly seasick.

When Sarah came into the conservatory, she exclaimed in shock at her mistress's appearance. "I've had a bit of a turn," said Miss Carstairs shortly. "No doubt I stayed up too late last night reading. If you would bring me some brandy and turn down my bed, I think I should like to lie down. No," — in answer to Sarah's inquiring look — "you must not call Dr. Bland. I have a slight headache; that is all."

Some little time later, Miss Carstairs lay in her darkened bedroom with a handkerchief soaked in eau de cologne pressed to her aching forehead. She did not know whether to exult or to despair. If her recent vision had been caused by the feverish overexcitement of an unbridled imagination, she feared that excessive study, coupled with spinsterhood, had finally driven her mad as her mother had always warned her it would.

But if the vision had been caused by the merman's deliberate attempt to "speak" to her, she had made a discovery of considerable scientific importance.

Miss Carstairs stirred impatiently against her pillows. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that the experience was genuine. That would suggest that somewhere in the unexplored deeps of the ocean was a race of mermen who could cast images, emotion, even sounds, from mind to mind. Fantastic as the thing sounded, it could be so. In the first edition of the *Origin*, Mr. Darwin had said that over the ages a bear might develop baleen and flippers, evolving finally into a kind of furry whale, if living upon plankton had become necessary to the species' survival. Why should not some ambitious prehistoric fish develop arms and a large, complex,

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brain, or some island-dwelling ape take to the sea and evolve gills and a tail?

The general mechanism of evolution might, given the right circumstances, produce anthropoid creatures adapted for life in the sea. And evolution could also account for a telepathic method of communication, just as it accounted for a verbal one. To Miss Carstairs's mind, the greater mystery was how she could have received and understood a psychic message. Presumably, some highly evolved organ or cerebral fold peculiar to mermen transmitted their thoughts; how could she, poor clawless, gill-less, forked creature that she was, share such an organ?

A particularly stabbing pain caused Miss Carstairs to clutch the handkerchief to her brow. She must rest, she thought. So she measured herself a small dose of laudanum, swallowed it, and slept.

Next morning, armed with smelling salts and a pair of smoked glasses that had belonged to her mother, Miss Carstairs approached the conservatory in no very confident mood. Her brain felt sore and bruised, almost stiff, like a long-immobilized limb that had been suddenly and violently exercised. Hesitantly, she peered through the french doors; the merman was back on his rock, staring out to sea. Determined that she would not allow him to overcome her with his visions, she averted her gaze, then marched across the conservatory, seated herself firmly in her chair, and perched the smoked glasses on her nose before daring to look up.

Whether it was the smoked glasses or Miss Carstairs's inward shrinking that weakened the effect of the merman's stare, this second communion was less intimate than the first. As if they were images painted on thin silk, Miss Carstairs saw a coral reef and jewel-like fish darting and hovering over the seafloor. This picture was accompanied by a distant chorus of squeaks, whistles, and random grunts, but she did not feel the press of the ocean upon her or any emotion other than her own curiosity and wonder.

"Is that your home?" she asked absurdly, and the images stopped. The merman's face did not, apparently could not, change its expression, but he advanced his sloping chin and fluttered his webbed fingers helplessly in front of his chest. "You're puzzled," said Miss Carstairs softly. "I don't wonder. But if you're as intelligent as I hope, you will deduce that I am trying to speak to you in my way as you are trying to speak to me in yours."

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This speech was answered by a pause, then a strong burst of images: a long-faced grouper goggling through huge, smoky eyes; a merman neatly skewered on a harpoon; clouds of dark blood drifting down a swift current. Gasping in pain, Miss Carstairs reeled as she sat and, knocking off the useless smoked spectacles, pressed her hands to her eyes. The pain subsided to a dull ache.

"I see that I shall have to find a way of talking to you," she said aloud. Fluttering claws signed the merman's incomprehension. "When you shout at me, it is painful." Her eye caught the hacksaw still lying by the pool. She bent, retrieved it, offered it to the merman blade-first. He recoiled and sucked his finger reminiscently. Miss Carstairs touched her own finger to the blade, tore the skin, then gasped as she had when he had "shouted" at her and, clutching her bleeding finger dramatically, closed her eyes and lolled back in her chair.

A moment passed. Miss Carstairs sat slowly upright as a sign that the performance was over. The merman covered his face with his fingers, webs spread wide to veil his eyes.

It was clearly a gesture of submission and apology, and Miss Carstairs was oddly moved by it. Cautiously, she stood, leaned over the coping, and grasped him lightly on one wrist. He stiffened, but did not pull away. "I accept your apology, merman," she said, keeping her face as impassive as his. "I think we've had enough for one day. Tomorrow we'll talk again."

Over the course of the next few weeks, Miss Carstairs learned to communicate with her merman by working out a series of dumb shows signifying various simple commands: "Too loud!" and "Yes" and "No." For more complex communications, she spoke to him as he spoke to her: by means of images.

The first day, she showed him an engraving of the Sirens that she had found in an illustrated edition of *The Odyssey*. It showed three fishtailed women, rather heavy about the breasts and belly, disposed gracefully on a rocky outcropping, combing their long falls of hair. The merman studied this engraving attentively. Then he fluttered his claws and sighed.

"I don't blame you," said Miss Carstairs. "They look hardly able to sit on the rocks and sing at the same time, much less swim." She laid aside *The Odyssey* and took up a tinted engraving of a parrot fish. The merman advanced his head and sniffed, then snatched the sheet from Miss Car-

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stairs's fingers and turned it this way and that. Catching her eyes, he sent her a vision of that same fish, shining vermilion and electric blue through clear tropical waters, its hard beak patiently scraping polyps out of coral dotted with the waving fronds of sea worms. Suddenly one of the coral's thornier parasites revealed itself as a merman's hand by grabbing the parrot fish and sweeping it into the predator's jaw. "Oh," said Miss Carstairs involuntarily as she became aware of an exciting, coppery smell and an altogether unfamiliar taste in her mouth. "Oh my."

She closed her eyes, and the vision dispersed. Her mouth watering slightly and her hands trembling, she picked up her pen to describe the experience. Something of her confusion must have communicated itself to the merman, for when she next sought his eyes, he gave her a gossamer vision of a school of tiny fish flashing brilliant fins. Over time, she came to recognize that this image served him for a smile, and that other seemingly random pictures signified other common expressions: sunlight through clear water was laughter; a moray eel, heavy, hideous, and sharply toothed, was weeping.

Autumn wore on to winter, and Miss Carstairs became increasingly adept at eliciting and reading the merman's images. Every morning she would go to the conservatory bearing engravings or sepia photographs and, with their help, wrestle some part of the merman's knowledge from him. Every afternoon, weather permitting, she would pace the marshes or the beach, sorting and digesting. Then, after an early dinner, she would settle herself at her desk and work on "A Preliminary Study of the Species *Homo Oceanus Telepathicans*, With Some Observations on His Society."

This document, which she was confident would assure E. Monroe Carstairs a chapter of his own in the annals of marine biology, began with a detailed description of the merman and the little she had been able to learn about his anatomy. The next section dealt with his psychic abilities; the next was headed "Communication and Society":

> As we have seen (Miss Carstairs wrote), quite a sophisticated level of communication can be achieved by an intelligent merman. Concrete as they necessarily are, his visions can, when properly read and interpreted, convey abstract ideas of some subtlety. But they can convey them only to one other mer. Chemical exudations (*vide supra*) signal only the simplest mer emotions: distress, lust,

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fear, anger, avoidance; booms and whistles attract a companion's attention or guide cooperative hunting maneuvers. All fine shades of meaning, all philosophy, all poetry, can pass from one mer to another only by direct and lengthy mutual gazing.

This fact, coupled with an instinctive preference for solitude similar to that of the harlequin bass (*S. tigrinus*) and the reef shark (*C. melanopterus*), has prevented *H. oceanus* from evolving anything that *H. sapiens* would recognize as a civilized society. From the time they can safely fend for themselves at about the age of six, mer-children desert their parents to swim and hunt alone, often faring from one ocean to another in their wanderings. When one of these mer-children meets with another of approximately its own age, it will generally pair with that mer-child, whether it be of the same or of the opposite sex. Such a pairing, which seems to be instinctive, is the merman's only means of social intercourse. It may last from a season or two to several years, but a couple with an infant commonly stay together until the child is ready to swim free. Legends exist of couples who swam faithfully together for decades, but as a rule, the enforced and extreme intimacy of telepathic communication comes to wear more and more heavily on one or both members of a pair until they are forced to part. Each mer then swims alone for whatever period of time fate and preference may dictate, until he meets with another receptive mer, when the cycle begins again.

Because of this peculiar behavioral pattern, the mer-folk can have no government, no religion, no community; in short, no possibility of developing a civilization even as primitive as that of a tribe of savages. Some legends they do have (*vide* Appendix A), some image-poems of transcendent beauty remembered and transmitted from pair to pair over the ages. But any new discovery made by a merman or merwoman swimming alone may all too easily die with its maker or become garbled in transmission between pair and pair. For, except within the pair-bond, the mer's instinct for cooperation is not strong.

The more she learned about the customs of the mer-folk, the more conscious Miss Carstairs became of how fortunate she was that the merman had consented to speak to her at all. Mermen swimming solitary were

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a cantankerous lot, as likely to attack a chance-met pair or single mer as to flee it.

So Miss Carstairs realized that the merman must look upon her as his companion for the duration of his cycle of sociability, but she did not understand the implications such a companionship had for him. When she thought of his feelings at all, she imagined that he viewed her with the same benevolent curiosity with which she viewed him, never considering that benevolent curiosity is a peculiarly human trait.

The crisis came in early December, when Miss Carstairs determined that it was time to tackle the subject of mer reproductive biology. She knew that an examination of the rituals of courtship and mating was central to the study of any new species, and no scientist, however embarrassing he might find the subject, was justified in shirking it. So Miss Carstairs gathered together her family album and a porcelain baby doll exhumed from a trunk of old toys in the attic, and used them, along with an old anatomy text, to give the merman a basic lesson in human reproduction.

At first, it seemed to Miss Carstairs that the merman was being particularly inattentive. But close observation having taught her to recognize his moods, she realized at length that his tapping fingers, gently twitching crest, and reluctance to meet her eyes, all signaled acute embarrassment.

This, Miss Carstairs found most interesting. She tapped on his wrist to get his attention, then shook her head and briefly covered her eyes. "I'm sorry," she told him, then held out a sepia photograph of herself as a stout and solemn infant propped between her frowning parents on a horsehair sofa. "But you must tell me what I want to know."

In response, the merman erected his crest, gaped fiercely, then dove into the deepest cranny of the pool, where he wantonly dismembered Miss Carstairs's largest lobster. In disgust, she threw the baby doll into the pool after him and stalked from the room. She was furious. Without this section, her article must remain unfinished, and she was anxious to send it off. After having exposed himself on the occasion of their first meeting, after having allowed her to rummage almost at will through his memories and his mind, why would he so suddenly turn coy?

All that afternoon, Miss Carstairs pondered the merman's reaction to her question, and by evening had concluded that the mer had some incomprehensible taboo concerning the facts of reproduction. Perhaps re-

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flection would show him that there was no shame in revealing them to her, who could have only an objective and scientific interest in them. It never occurred to her that it might bewilder or upset the merman to speak of mating to a female to whom he was bonded, but with whom he could never mate.

The next morning, Miss Carstairs entered the conservatory to see the merman sitting on his rock, his face turned sternly from the ocean and toward the door. Clearly, he was waiting for her, and when she took her seat and lifted her eyes to his, she felt absurdly like a girl caught out in some childish peccadillo and called into her mother's sitting room to be chastised.

Without preamble, the merman sent a series of images breaking over her. Two mer — one male, one female — swam together, hunted, coupled. Soon they parted, one to the warm coral reefs, the other to arctic seas. The merwoman swam, hunted, explored. A time passed: not long, although she could not have told how she knew. The merwoman met a merwoman, drove her away, met a merman, flung herself upon him amorously. This exchange was more complex than the earlier couplings; the merman resisted and fled when it was accomplished.

The merman began to eat prodigiously. He sought a companion and came upon a merman, with whom he mated, and who hunted for him when he could no longer easily hunt for himself. As the merman became heavier, he seemed to become greedier, stuffing his pouch with slivers of fish as if to hoard them. How ridiculous, thought Miss Carstairs. Then, all at once, a tiny crested head popped up from the merman's pouch, and the scales covering it gave a writhing heave. Tiny gills fluttered; tiny arms worked their way out of the pouch. Claiming its wandering gaze with iridescent eyes, the merman's companion coaxed the infant from its living cradle and took it tenderly into his arms.

THREE DAYS later, Miss Carstairs sent John to the village to mail the completed manuscript of her article, and then she put it out of her mind as firmly as she could. Brooding, she told herself, would not speed it any faster to the editor's desk or influence him to look more kindly upon it once it got there. In the meanwhile, she must not waste time. There was much more the merman could tell her, much more for her to learn. Her stacks of notes and manuscripts grew.

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In late January, "Preliminary Study of the Species *Homo Oceanus Telepathicans*" was returned with a polite letter of thanks. As always, the editor of *The American Naturalist* admired Mr. Carstairs's graceful prose style and clear exposition, but feared that this particular essay was more a work of imagination than of scientific observation. Perhaps it could find a more appropriate place in a literary journal.

Miss Carstairs tore the note into small pieces. Then she went down to the conservatory. The merman met her eyes when she entered, recoiled, and grinned angrily at her; Miss Carstairs grinned angrily back. Obscurely, she felt that her humiliation was his fault, that he had misled or lied to her. She wanted to dissect his brain and send it pickled to the editor of *The American Naturalist*; she wanted him to know exactly what had happened and how he had been the cause of it all. But since she had no words to tell him this, Miss Carstairs fled the house for the windy marshes, where she squelched through the matted beach grass until she was exhausted. Humanity had always bored her, she thought, and now scholarship had betrayed her. She had nothing else.

Standing ankle-deep in a brackish pool, Miss Carstairs looked back across the marshes to her house. The sun rode low in a mackeral sky; its light danced on the calm water around her and glanced off the conservatory's glazing. The merman would be sitting on his rock like the Little Mermaid in the tale her father had read her, gazing out over the ocean he could not reach. She had a sudden vision of a group of learned men standing around the pond, shaking their heads as they stroked their whiskers and debated whether or not this so-called merman had an immortal soul. Perhaps it was just as well the editor of *The American Naturalist* had rejected the article. Miss Carstairs could imagine sharing her knowledge of the merman with the world, but not sharing the merman himself. He had become necessary to her, she realized, her one comfort and her sole companion.

Next morning she was back in the conservatory, and on each morning succeeding that. Day after day she gazed through the merman's eyes as if he were a living bathysphere, watching damselfish and barracuda stitch silver through the greenish antlers of elkhorn coral, observing the languorous unfurling of the manta ray's wings and the pale groping fingers of hungry anemones. As she opened herself to the merman's visions, Miss Carstairs began not only to see and hear, but also to feel, to smell, even to

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taste, the merman's homesick memories. She became familiar with the complex symphony of the ocean, the screeching scrape of the parrot fish teeth over coral, the tiny, amatory grunts of frillfins. In the shape of palpable odors present everywhere in the water she learned the distinct tastes of fear, of love, of blood, of anger. Sometimes, after a day of vicarious exploration, she would lie in her bed at night and weep for the thinness of the air around her, the silent flatness of terrestrial night.

The snow fell without Miss Carstairs's noticing it, and melted and turned to rain, which froze again, then warmed and gentled toward spring. In her abandoned study, the ink dried in the well, and the books and papers lay strewn around the desk like old wrecks. Swimming with the merman in the open sea, Miss Carstairs despised the land. When she walked abroad, she avoided marshes and clambered instead out over the weed-slick rocks to the end of the spit, where she would stand shivering in the wind and spray, staring into the waves breaking at her feet. Most days, however, she spent in the conservatory, gazing hungrily into the merman's pearly eyes.

The merman's visions were becoming delirious with the need for freedom as, in his own way, he pleaded with Miss Carstairs to release him. He showed her mermen caught in fishermen's nets, torn beyond recognition by their struggles to escape the ropes. He showed her companions turning on each other, mate devouring mate when the cycle of one had outlasted the cycle of the other. But Miss Carstairs viewed these horrific images simply as dramatic incidents in his submarine narrative, like sharks feeding, or groupeer nibbling at the eyes of drowned sailors.

When at last the merman took to sulking under the rock, Miss Carstairs sat in her wicker chair, like a squid lurking among the coral, and waited patiently for him to emerge. She knew the pond was small; she sensed that the ocean's limitless freedom was more real to him when he shared his memories of it. She reasoned that no matter how distasteful the process had become, he must eventually rise and feed her the visions she craved. If, from time to time, she imagined that he might end her tyranny by tearing out her throat, she dismissed the fear. Was he not wholly in her power? When she knew the ocean as well as he, when she could name each fish with its own song, then she might let him swim free.

Early one morning the merman woke and slithered over the rim of his gray stone prison. Seal-like, he humped himself toward the door, pulled

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himself up the doorframe, pressed the handle, and fumbled open the door. He crawled down the two wide steps to the garden and across the path toward the beach stair. His scales scraped off onto the sharp pebbles; his skin dulled and puckered as its protective mucus dried in the sun. When he reached the sundial in the center of the garden, he heaved himself up on his tail and sought the sea. Then he collapsed.

Some little time later, Miss Carstairs came down to find the rock empty. At first she thought the merman was hiding; only when she moved toward the pool did she notice that the floor of the conservatory was awash with water and that the door was ajar. Against all odds, her merman had deserted her.

Miss Carstairs groped for her wicker chair and sat, bereaved and betrayed as she had not been since her father's death. Her eye fell on the open door; she saw the blood and water smeared over the steps. Rising hurriedly, she followed the trail through the garden to where the merman lay sprawled across the gravel. With anxious, delicate fingers, she caressed his mouth and chest to feel the thin breath coming from his lips and the faint rhythmic beat under his ribs. His tail was scored and tattered where the scales had been torn from it.

Somewhere in her soul, Miss Carstairs was conscious of dismay and tenderness and horror. But in the forefront of her brain, she was conscious only of anger. She had fed him, she thought; she had befriended him; she had opened her mind to his visions. How dare he abandon her? Grasping him by the shoulders, she shook him violently. "Wake up and look at me!" she shouted.

Obediently, the merman opened his opalescent eyes and conjured a vision: the face of a middle-aged human woman. It was a simian face, slope-jawed and snub-nosed, wrinkled and brown.

The ape-woman opened her mouth and spoke, showing large, flat teeth. Harsh noises scraped over Miss Carstairs's ears, bearing with them the taint of hunger and need and envy as sweat bears the scent of fear. Grimacing fearfully, the ape-woman stooped toward Miss Carstairs and seized her shoulders with long fingers that burned and stung her like anemones. Miss Carstairs tore herself from the ape-woman's poisonous grasp and covered her face with her hands.

A rough claw gripped her wrist, shook it to get her attention. Reluctantly, Miss Carstairs removed her hands and saw the merman, immovably

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melancholy, peering up at her. How could he bear to look at her? she wondered miserably. He shook his head, a gesture he had learned from her, and answered her with a kind of child's sketch: an angular impression of a woman's face, inhumanly beautiful in its severity. Expressions of curiosity, wonder, joy, discovery darted across the woman's features like a swarm of minnows, and she tasted as strongly of solitude as a free-swimming mer.

Through her grief and remorse, Miss Carstairs recognized the justice of each of these portraits. "Beast and angel," she murmured, remembering old lessons, and again the merman nodded. "No, I'm not a mer, am I, however much I have longed for the sea. And it isn't you I want, but what you know, what you have seen."

The merman showed her a coral reef, bright and various, which seemed to grow as she watched, becoming more complex, more brilliant with each addition; then an image of herself standing knee-deep in the sea, watching the merman swim away from her. She smelled of acceptance, resignation, inwardness — the taste of a mer parting from a loved companion.

Wearily, Miss Carstairs rubbed her forehead, which throbbed and swelled with multiplying thoughts. Her notebooks, her scholarship, her long-neglected study, all called to her through the merman's vision. At the same time, she noted that he was responding directly to her. Had she suddenly learned to speak visions? Had he learned to see words? Beyond these thoughts, Miss Carstairs was conscious of the fierce warmth of the spring sun, the rich smell of the damp soil, and the faint green rustle of growing leaves. She didn't know if they were the merman's perceptions or her own.

Miss Carstairs pulled herself heavily to her feet and brushed down her skirts with a shaking hand. "It's high time for you to be off," she said. "I'll just ring for Stephen and John to fetch the sling." Unconsciously, she sought the savor of disapproval and rum that was John's signal odor; it was several hours stale. At the same time, she had a clear vision of Stephen, wrapped in a disreputable jacket, plodding with bucket and fishing pole across the garden to the seawall. She saw him from above, as she had seen him from her bedroom window early that morning. So it was her vision, not the merman's. The scientist in her noted that fact, and also that the throbbing in her head had settled down to a gentle pulse, discernible, like the beating of her heart, only if she concentrated on it.

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A laughing school of fish flashed through the ordered currents of her thoughts, and Miss Carstairs understood that the merman found her new consciousness amusing. Then a searing sense of heat and a tight, itching pain under her skin sent her running into the house shouting for John. He appeared from the kitchen. "Get a bucket and a blanket and wet down the merman," said Miss Carstairs. "You'll find him in the garden, near the sundial. Then bring the stretcher." He gaped at her uncomprehendingly. "Hurry!" she snapped, and strode off toward the seawall in search of Stephen.

Following his odor, she soon found him sitting hunched over his fishing pole and his pipe. He tasted of wet wool, tobacco, and solitude. "Stephen," she began. "I have learned everything from the merman that he is able to tell me."

Stephen turned, looked up inquiringly, and lowered his pipe.

"I have decided to release him."

"Yes, Miss," he said.

The tide was going out, and the men had to carry their burden far past the spit and the tidal pool where the merman had first washed ashore. It was heavy going, for the wet sand was soft and the merman was heavy. When they came at last to the water, Miss Carstairs stood by as they released the merman into the shallows, then waded out up to her knees to stand beside him. The sun splintered the water into blinding prisms; she turned her eyes inshore, away from the glare. Behind her, Stephen and John were trudging back toward the beach, and above them the conservatory glittered like a crystal jewel box. Sharp tastes of old seaweed and salt-crusted rocks stung her nose. Squinting down, Miss Carstairs saw the merman floating quietly against the pull of the sea, one webbed hand grasping the sodden fabric of her skirt. His crest was erect, his mouth a little open. When he turned his pearly eyes to her, Miss Carstairs read joy in them, and something like regret.

"I shall not forget what you have shown me," said Miss Carstairs, although she knew the words to be superfluous. Mentally, she called up the ape-woman and the scientist, and fused them into a composite portrait of a human woman, beast and angel, heart and mind, need and reason; and she offered that portrait to the merman as a gift, an explanation, a farewell. Then he was gone, and Miss Carstairs began to wade back to shore.

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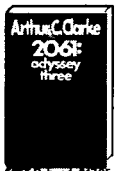

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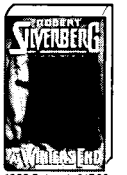

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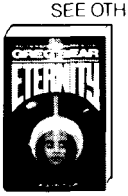

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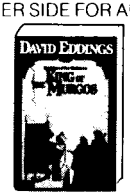

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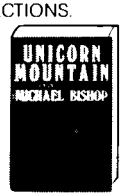

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